Degenerate characters -

BOOKS BY WARD GREENE

CORA POTTS

RIDE THE NIGHTMARE

JONATHAN CAPE AND HARRISON SMITH, INCORPORATED,
139 EAST 46TH STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y. AND 91 WELLINGTON
STREET, WEST, TORONTO, CANADA; JONATHAN CAPE, LTD.,
30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON, W. C. 1, ENGLAND

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BY

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NEW YORK
JONATHAN CAPE & HARRISON SMITH

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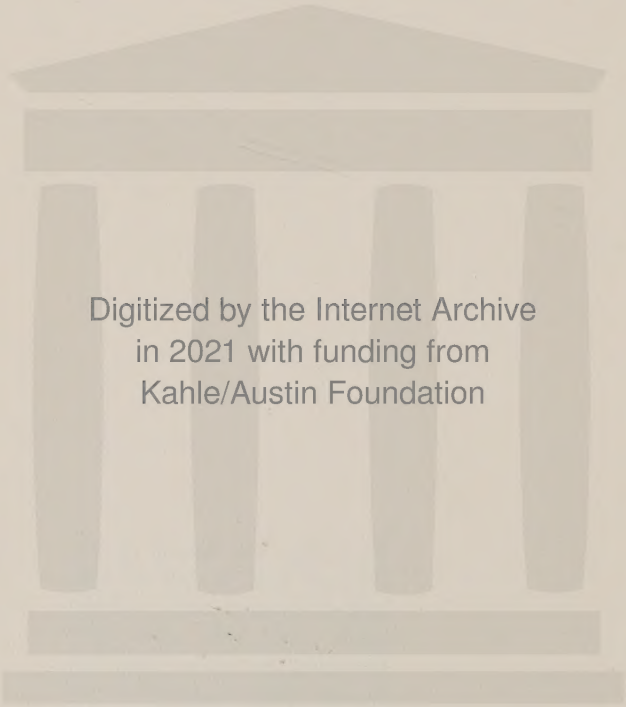
WARD GREENE
FIRST PUBLISHED, 1930

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, BINGHAMTON, N. Y.
AND BOUND BY THE J. F. TAPLEY COMPANY

Yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

—ECCLESIASTES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PART ONE

I

He was baptized Jacob Steerforth after an Old Testament opportunist and a Victorian rake, and Perry was the name of his father, a preacher and a descendant of preachers. At sixteen, Eureka, Kentucky, saw him as a gawky apprentice to the Lord. Of rebellion under the shock hair, of those sparks which one day were to redden his world, Eureka had observed nothing from the hour the baby was born to Christian Perry and Sally, his wife, until the night Jacob quit the town and its people forever.

Jake shaved at a precocious age.

Jake "drew clever, the young scamp"—a dubious talent.

There, in Eureka's eyes, the distinction of Jacob Steerforth Perry began and ended.

Even when Fortitude Perry, approaching the backhouse in the twilight, heard noises, parted the bushes and saw what she saw; even when she had burst into the kitchen with her news and Christian Perry slammed out with his belt whistling in his

hand, neither aunt nor father regarded the episode as more or less than was to be expected in a normal lad. The new century was still raw along the Ohio, the young sucked knowledge early from a rough teat, and Jacob's sin was that of his brothers' in any river town.

Yet Christian, treading stealthily, had his surprise. The yellow wench lay supine among the brambles, stripped of her rags; so far were Fortitude's prophecies verified. But Jacob, fully clad, sat on the rail fence a good two feet away, loudly talking, and before the belt landed, Christian heard words that astounded him. The nude condition of the girl he had anticipated, but not the discovery of his son cursing her with verses from the book of Jeremiah.

Jacob sprang, crouched to strike back.

"Whoremonger!" Christian shouted.

The belt wavered as his eyes strained through the dusk. There was something out of kilter here, something not in tune with the conventions of the situation. The nigger had not scrambled up, huddling her dress about her, whimpering for mercy. She lay as he had first spied her with her arms taut above her head and her eyeballs rolling, and though she moaned like a Holy Roller in the spirit's grasp, her petitions were addressed not to Christian but to Jacob and the Almighty. Then Christian saw a bent sapling and near Mamie's feet an upright stake, and he realized that she

was bound. Stretched head and heels like a slaughtered beef.

"Hit me again and I'll bust you wide open!"

Jacob's defiance across the little glade quivered with fury and interrupted lust. Often he had suffered his father's strap and not rebelled—the buckle in his hams until the tears and blood spurted. But a simple thrashing is one thing; interference at such a moment calls on manhood.

"You—you—"

Obscene epithets poured from Jacob; Christian, roaring, swung the belt.

A sickle moon came over the trees, still green with the last daylight, stars glittered, and by the creek a whippoorwill mourned. Now the sobbing of the yellow girl was a desperate repetition of one phrase, over and over with the whippoorwill's cry. "Oh, Lawd . . . Oh, Lawd . . . Oh, Lawd!" Jacob had his father down. He pounded his father's face. . . .

It was dark when Christian rose. The moon was gone, the stars; a black smear hid the sky. He stood stupidly, his hand on the back of his head where it hurt him. His face did not hurt so much, it was the back of his head that tried to think and that could not because it hurt. He wiped his hands on his shirt. One of them was badly cut where he had held on to the belt while he fought. He groped for the belt, stooping painfully, put it on and

cinched it. Better be getting back to the house. . . .

First he untied Mamie. She cried a lot and carried on, and though later he was to whip her to try to get the truth out of her, he was never to understand it all—the fettered wrists and ankles, Jeremiah instead of Solomon's song, and Jacob gloating from the fence—he was to see them, finally, no more clearly than he did the negress shivering at his feet.

"Put on your clothes," he told her. "Get out of here."

For an hour Fortitude had waited at the kitchen door, staring toward the blackness where even the moaning had died with the stars. When she heard footsteps at last, she scurried to her chair and looked up only when Christian was well inside the room. In the glare of the oil lamp he was a brutal sight. Without a word, Fortitude got out the rag-bag and cut the hunk of fat pork. Without a word, after Christian had doused himself, she put the fat pork on his eye and bandaged it. Silently she cooked his supper. Silently they ate. And over her sewing, watching her brother as he smoked and spat at the fire, Fortitude asked no question and had but one thought—would Christian lock the door? Not until he had gone upstairs and she was alone with the patter of the rain did she let her breath suspire.

But Christian came down again, a bundle and

books in his arms. The bundle he flung into a corner. "Give those to the niggers," he said. The books, by Harry Castleman and G. A. Henty, Christian threw on the fire. From the parlor he fetched another which Fortitude knew painted a villain beloved of the romantic. And Fortitude was glad that Sally Perry was dead as she watched "David Copperfield" become ashes with "Frank on a Gunboat."

Then Christian locked the door against the storm and Fortitude had no more need of questions. She was never to speak her nephew's name in that house again and, on those days when she would dig from the hair trunk Jacob's baby shoes and the scrawls he made of hens and cows when he was six, she was to be secretive about it, to wipe her eyes before she went downstairs.

Jake got something to eat at a waterfront saloon and caught the first down freight. He was sitting atop a box car between Hopkinsville and Paducah when he stopped sucking his torn knuckles to grin.

"You're different. . . . The old man's a fool. You know what he thought you were doing to that nigger! Well, weren't you? Naw—not that you haven't a many a time, but this was—different. Stakin' her out like the Apaches do prisoners. Cussin' her with Jeremiah. Scared her to death! She thought you were puttin' a conjur on her. It was more fun than plain poontang. Any fool

can get that. You're different. . . . Different from all of 'em back there in Eureka. What'll they amount to? Nothin'! But you've got somethin'. You've got talent. You've got education. You're going to be different. . . . Thank God, the old man had sense enough to make you read and study. And now I reckon he thinks you're goin' plumb to hell. . . . I wonder . . . Shucks! What's it all amount to, religion and God and what the old man believes? You ain't afraid of the old man. You ain't afraid of God. You're different. . . ."

Down the Mississippi valley the storm charged. It battered the house where Fortitude tossed and Christian slept deep. Rain lashed the crawling box cars and lightning stabbed at them. But Jake kept his feet on the slippery roof and balled his fist at heaven.

"I dare you, God! . . . Hit me! Hit me . . . !"

He had not heard, then, of Bernard Shaw's earlier audacity in a London drawing-room, nor did he know that Sinclair Lewis would hurl the challenge from a Kansas City pulpit in 1926. He was, in his own fancy, unique. When a kindly brakeman pushed him, half drowned, into the caboose, he wanted to boast to the train crew, but decided to refrain. Railroad men are tough, but they are pious. Jake shivered by the stove and hugged to himself the gratifying fact of his difference from all other men.

In Memphis Jake starved for a while. In Montgomery he was arrested and served time with other hoboes. He farmed, he railroaded, for a year he bossed laborers in the turpentine belt. In Mobile he got a job with an itinerant photographer and tramped the state selling to blacks and poor whites tinted photographs which they enshrined on easels in their cabins. Drifting to New Orleans, he joined a carnival touring Texas—and returned to be a bookie's tout, theater usher, doorman at a nickleodeon, press-agent and, finally, police reporter for a newspaper. He was then twenty-one. At no period, though he was once clubbed unconscious by a jockey and for six months was kept by an Afro-French prostitute, did he lose his conviction of superiority. The evidence, however, was no plainer to the world than it had been to Eureka—Jake still drew clever when the itch seized him, and Jake had a beard which made him look older and, in a grotesque way, divine.

His other convictions were more skeptical than his sense of superiority. Most of them were derived from books, of which he had devoured a vast number from libraries and second-hand shops. He wrote, while a police reporter, some notes for an autobiography:

"Life is actual, the rest uncertain, so take the cash and let the credit go. Only a fool sacrifices good meat for a pig in a poke. Omar said it all, but Nietzsche added some valuable tips for the

modern man. Live selfishly. Everybody does, but those who admit it get the most fun. I believe: that loyalty is a good virtue for those around me, my friends are those who can help me, my enemies are those who can and will do me harm, and that nobody else counts; that money, while essential, is a nuisance and the only fool bigger than a man who works is a man who works when he doesn't have to; that success is important only if it will give me freedom; that all beliefs, including mine, are open to change; that, nevertheless, I absolutely believe in myself and my destiny."

The autobiography never progressed further. For the next day his city editor fired him—and presented him with a more tangible goal for pursuit than literature.

"You're no good, Perry. You're too lazy or indifferent or plain ornery, I don't know which. But there's something wrong. You don't seem to give a hoot. Why don't you try something else? You can draw—I've seen your sketches. There's no market for that stuff here, the paper's too poor—why don't you go to Corinth?"

"Why the hell should I go to Corinth? It's like all the rest of these Southern cities—either a lot of busted old Joes pretending they're aristocrats when they haven't a dime's worth of culture left, or a lot of howling god-hoppers running the town for purity and pep. New Orleans is one place that's different—it has atmosphere."

"Atmosphere don't pay salaries, bub. Take a tip from me—Corinth is some town. It's grown fifty thousand in the last ten years and it's just started. It's got good people, there's no finer anywhere, but it's got pep, too. It's like a Northern town, 'specially since Patton bought the *Blade*."

"Who's Patton? Will he give me a job?" asked Jake.

The city editor looked the cocky young man up and down.

"If I hadn't already fired you, Perry, I would now. Who's Patton? My God, I would sooner expect a newspaper man to ask me who's Horace Greeley! No, he won't give you a job! You ass, Patton's probably never been in Corinth. But he's running the other Corinth papers ragged. The idea is to go to them with your stuff—can you get that through those bushes? If you can't, get out of here and live on atmosphere."

Jake caressed his chin. The life of a vagabond is disparate, but it does not fill the belly. With part of his notice salary he bought a railroad ticket, with the rest a portfolio, a green corduroy vest and a malacca stick. Even indulgent New Orleans lifted an eyebrow.

"Artist," he heard a woman say outside the station.

Jake grinned in his beard.

In the city of Corinth, in the year 1910, only

old Southern colonels displayed whiskers, walking sticks and wide black hats. But if the young man who asked a policeman the way to the *Courier* building, was aware of derision in the officer's eyes, or of any notice attending his progress along the street, he gave no sign. He walked with a long, unhurried stride, his portfolio under his left arm, his right swinging the cane, and his eyes unswerving from some evanescent objective dead ahead.

At the entrance to the *Courier* building, a group of printers bristled. Elaborately they opened a path, one shouting, "Watch out, there, feller! Don't muss Daisy!" In the elevator two girls giggled, and their mirth, with the elevator man's belch, pursued the young man down the corridor. Still he seemed oblivious. He found a door marked in black, free-hand letters, "Butterfield," and when no response came to his knock, turned the knob and walked in.

Beyond a railing and two cluttered desks, a bald head glittered.

"Mr. Butterfield?"

The head moved violently.

"Don't bother me! Tell Packard I'll make his damn deadline!"

So the young man stood quietly until Mr. Butterfield had scratched with ink and pen for ten minutes and a boy had come in and haunted Mr. Butterfield for another five minutes. Mr. Butter-

field suddenly pitched cardboard at the boy and yelled, "Beat it! . . . Forty-five minutes they give you and expect another 'Dropping the Pilot!' . . . Well, they got it! Best godamighty cartoon I ever made in my life. . . ."

Since the last remark appeared as much addressed to the visitor as to the boy, who had slammed the door on it, the young man approached the railing and Butterfield got his first complete view.

He did not snort. Perhaps he was feeling too injured by Fate to snort. Or perhaps, in spite of the obvious youth of the face above the beard, there was something in that face or the visitor's voice to justify the beard. The voice was humility itself; it was too humble; voices like that are put on and off for occasions, like silk hats.

"My name is Perry, Mr. Butterfield. I have some drawings. . . ."

Butterfield inspected the drawings. They were mostly sketches of waterfront and field types, nigger stevedores, nigger mammies, pickaninnies, cotton-pickers, with here and there a smarter figure —maskers at a dance, troubadours. A landscape seemed familiar.

"New Orleans?" said Butterfield.

"Yes." The young man hesitated a fraction, "And France."

"H-m-m-m-m." It was a long time since Butterfield had inspected sketches sketched in France.

He continued to turn over the contents of the portfolio, but he was more conscious of the artist than of his work—really he was inspecting the corduroy vest and thinking that this Perry was a queer kind of duck, but maybe not so queer . . . over there in France a long time . . . probably just back . . . a fellow got so he dressed like the French . . . when in Rome . . . he, Butterfield, dreamed of France once; how would he, Butterfield look in a Vandyke beard?

"I'm hunting a job," said Jake.

Butterfield went up to see the managing editor, taking the drawings.

The managing editor pawed the drawings and said they looked like a lot of crap to him but if Butterfield said so they'd give this kid a chance.

"He's not a kid, Mr. Packard," said Butterfield. "He's got a beard . . . funny looking guy . . . looks like Jesus. He's just back from France, see?"

"Well, we could use a man to do sports and trials and so on," said the managing editor. "If this kid looks like Jesus, maybe we'll have a miracle in the art department. We need one."

Jake was told to report Monday at thirty dollars a week.

Leaving the building, walking along the street, the *Courier's* new artist was still intent on his evanescent objective. The glare of the elevator man, female titters, the ribaldry of printers,

effected him no more than they had before. Not until he had traversed many blocks, rapping them unfailingly with his cane, not until he had climbed narrow stairs above a laundry, whence he disappeared through a door he unlocked, did Jake look anywhere save straight ahead.

Once in his harsh little room, however, his objective must have been attained. At least, he found it necessary no longer to concentrate on a single line of vision. For he leaned on his cane in the middle of the floor and, slowly, deliberately, he pivoted around, around, while a variety of expressions succeeded each other on his face, ranging from disdain to a snarl of challenge. It was as though the room were peopled by a host instead of a few articles of furniture.

When he had dropped hat and portfolio in a corner, removed the corduroy vest, which was hot, and scratched his beard, which must have been hotter, he flung himself on his back on the cot, and to the ceiling addressed a mumbling sing-song.

This was his way of talking to himself. It is a common practice among negroes and among many white Southerners, too.

"Jakey got job," he mumbled. "Jakey smart. Jakey different. Jakey show 'em all!" . . . He thumbed his nose at the ceiling. . . . "Poot!—poot!—Old Nobodaddy!"

II

It was the fortune of Jake Perry to reach Corinth at a union of circumstances highly favorable to any stripling with some talent, the cunning to exploit it and a hankering to impress others with his individuality.

That year, which saw the city swell to a hundred thousand in its gestation from mellow old capital to metropolis, saw also James Blaine Patton, from his yacht off Capri, look hungrily toward that part of his native land where Northern impulse to "progress" was galvanizing streams, fields and homes fallow since the Civil War. In three cables, Patton had bought the *Blade* for his chain of papers and the wheels were turning to complete, with the South, America's seduction to the Patton formula for entertaining the public.

"Yellow journalism" was new to gentle Dixie. With a menagerie of editors, writers, artists, photographers and other gaudy fleas trained in his New York circus, Patton one morning lit with a screech on a people tamed to the *Courier's* sober presentation of the less scandalous local and world events.

By noon, with the *Courier* just going to press, the *Blade's* third edition was sold out and citizens were beginning to understand that the President was not assassinated, a Chicago showgirl had merely been divorced. They resented a little this ado over nothing, but the wide headlines were exciting, the comic strips were funny, Dolly Dart's "Helps for the Heartsick" enchanted them, it was fascinating to read about the goings-on of kings, the pictures were the biggest and startlingest they had ever seen, and though, within the week, mutters of "sensationalism" and "Patton filth" were pervasive, the town still bought, the *Blade's* circulation mounted, and the *Courier* and the *Morning Star* had learned their lesson. There was only one way to fight a prairie fire. The *Courier* and the *Star* cast loose their purse-strings and their scruples, and raced to out-Patton Patton.

Then "Wild Ed" Flannery, bemoaning from the *Blade's* city desk the dearth of raw meat in a town where only niggers got arrested and wives nagged their husbands instead of suing them, picked up his telephone, barked once, and thanked God. Todd Devlin coughed in City Hospital with a hole in his back, Dora Devlin sobbed hysteria to the detectives trampling her Persian rugs, and before the breath was cool in the pearl-handled Derringer they fished out of the hydrangeas, the entire press of Corinth bayed on the trail of a story made to order for a newspaper feud.

Jake Perry went to work on the old *Courier* the Monday after the Saturday night Todd Devlin was shot. At once he, the individualist, was submerged by a flood that seemed likely to drown his very identity.

The elevator man, holding an extra, spared him not a glare. A girl read over the elevator man's shoulder, too engrossed for flirtation. Printers rushing in the halls wore the look of somnambulists. Even Butterfield, in and out with photographs dripping from his thumbs, gave him only a nod. Jake fidgeted in a corner of Butterfield's office, reading about the Devlin shooting and now and then fetching his beard a reassuring stroke.

After while the door banged open.

"Hey, you!—Perry? Hop down to the jail! Got paper? Got plenty of pencils? They're moving Mrs. Devlin—we might get a shot at her—snap—sketch —anything! . . . Look up Brent . . . Sam Bell . . . any of our boys. . . . Better leave that fairy's wand behind. . . ."

Jake left the cane. It was his first confession of self-doubt.

The famous Devlin case to-day is a packet of crumbling clippings in newspaper morgues. How young Todd Devlin, "fortune's favorite," crawled in his own blood from the conservatory to the marble carriage block where the moonlight and a neighbor discovered him; how he lived for weeks with the bullet against his spine, paralyzed beyond

word or sign to reveal his secret; how beautiful Dora Devlin, bride at Christmas and widow before June—"Dora of the Orchids" the *Blade* dubbed her at the trial—proved her innocence to twelve good, true and bewitched men; what part the stolen letters played; who was To-To; why Fanny, the maid, vanished and whether the girl in Honduras was really she; the riddle of the tire tracks and the broken hedge, with the provoking possibility that Dora didn't shoot him, after all—these memories may be left to the sages who still debate them nights on the *Courier's* dog watch.

What is necessary in order to follow Jake Perry's career is to understand the effect of events such as the Devlin case on Jake's associates and, for that matter, on the whole of Corinth—an effect that created heroes and geniuses out of $30-a-week reporters, wrapped a false glamour around their lives and, largely among those they came in contact with and certainly in the lads themselves, helped to instill a delusion of importance from which most of them never recovered.

In those days, aviation and bootlegging were not the romantic professions, "chains" and syndicates had not standardized journalism, college graduates chased fire-engines for nothing because they would shortly be Richard Harding Davis, and older men proudly took a pittance while owners fostered the legend that the simple glory of a scoop for the old Logotype was worth millions gained in any other

treadmill. There was, if you like, a kind of glory about it.

When Patton came to Corinth, the local press already had its Davises and O'Malleys—old Ned Duffy, who had hanged a man before the days of the telegraph because his mailed-in-advance story described the wretch's tortures on the gallows and the sheriff got dysentery at the last moment; Noel Hart, the *Star's* police reporter, who at dawn found the Mayor dead in an alley and, knowing his paper had gone to press and the afternoon opposition would be first with the news, shoved His Honor under a doorstep, to rot there until sundown; Joe Armondale, with the mob at the lynching of Sam Bose, and in the office three hours later with a broken arm, a clean beat and Sam's left ear as evidence; Jeff Billups, author of the celebrated "mixed babies" story; Shag Kenny, who wrote better drunk, it was devoutedly believed, than most men sober. These and a score of other valiants in myth or in person filled the thrones of Corinth journalism, and, after the Devlin case broke, Jake Perry observed them and watched fresh valiants crowned.

He studied on that first day, while he waited in the jail office for Bill Brent to say "Hey you!" Kenny and Armondale and Billups and Brent himself, men who seemed extraordinarily assured, self-sufficient and mysterious. They whispered in corners, they patronized deputies, and they paid him

and his beard very little attention. Jake was awed and depressed.

The reporters for the *Blade* were even doughtier. They came from Chicago and New York and San Francisco, with a snap to their clothes, a whang to their speech and an apparent readiness to dynamite the city for a story. One of them was the famous Latham who had covered the Thaw trial. Jake was both plucked up and chagrined to note Latham's cane.

He had pointed out to him Peter Braden, the d'Artagnan of the *Star*, and heard the story of Braden's luck. Braden was stewed when the Devlin shooting hit headquarters, but by chance he was sleeping it off in the very patrol the detectives rushed to the Devlin home, and he lurched out to question beautiful Dora before the other reporters were in miles. "The son-of-a-bitch didn't know whether it was a fight or a fire," said the photographer who told the story, but it was as if he fondly cursed a national idol.

Again, a few days later, while Jake waited to show Mr. Packard a drawing, the city room of the *Courier*, never a lullaby, became a bedlam. In the door had appeared a dyspeptic looking youth in spectacles, and men leaping from their typewriters hailed him as though the Lord had descended. Mr. Packard all but knocked the drawing out the window.

"Hel-lo, Perk!"

Jake watched them pumping hands.

"Who's that?" he asked an office boy.

"That?" The boy's scorn of Jake was surpassed only by his admiration for the youth who in normal times it was his mission in life to irritate. "That's Perkins—didinja read his Sunnyside stuff?"

Jake remembered—Sunnyside, the hamlet where Todd Devlin's parents had sequestered him under the care of an illustrious surgeon, and this must be Albert T. Perkins, who had smuggled himself aboard the special train and told, in 10-point columns, of the arrival in the dawn, the little old lady in rusty black, the broken cry, "My son!" and the sufferer's haggard eyes yearning out from his numb body at the sunrise on the cotton fields, the quiet street, the ancient elms . . . "so Todd Devlin came home to die." . . . Perkins, back from Sunnyside . . . Cæsar returned from Gaul. . . .

Jake stared. He wanted to know Perkins. He wanted to know Billups and Armondale and Bill Brent, to get drunk with Peter Braden, to listen, in the inner circle, to Latham's tales of what really happened in the tower studio of Madison Square Garden. Beside them, Butterfield was a crotchety old man, the slave of an ink bottle, and he himself only a slave of Butterfield's.

For he did not see these fellows as laborers hired to pick and weave a commodity sold to-day and junked to-morrow, he saw them as they saw themselves or, for that matter, as most of their world

saw them, adventurers all on an ever glittering argosy. . . . "So you're on the *Courier?* Say, tell me about this Devlin case . . . is it true that . . ." The flattering curiosity, the assumption of secrets and deeds beyond the common man.

Nor did he regard them, yet, as beings subject to the same laws as clerks and salesmen. He was to learn that Bill Brent liked golf and rosebushes, that Armondale was henpecked and that the terrifying Packard's chief worries in life were constipation and the installments on his bungalow. But at first the lions stalked free and golden, and their overheard growls rumbled with experiences and appetites remote and tantalizing to the stranger. Out of his own wanderings he could have flaunted a yarn or two. He itched to do it, yet hesitated; the outsider, the cub cartoonist working for old Butterfield, tugging at his beard, properly humbled while his eyes sneered, hurrying out in the ridiculous black hat—and that vest.

"They're looking at you," he thought. "They're sizing you up. They know you're different . . . like they are. . . ."

And in his room, sprawling about and mumbling when he should have been working, he would concoct a little fantasy of Jacob in the lions' den—and even Mr. Packard eating out of his hand.

Then he would go out refreshed, and the cane would swing unconstrained until he moored it on his chair in the public library.

Reading—and Effie—furnished the only recreations in his solitary evenings, Effie the one morsel to feed his vanity. She did something in the Western Union office in the *Courier* building, and she had been easy pickings for Jake, who had early decided that women walked the earth solely for man's service and that there were two kinds, those who submitted to him and Nature's freaks. He heartily disliked the latter class, and he respected neither.

Effie smiled at him in the elevator, but she did not laugh.

"Hello," said Jake. "Like me—don't you?"

"I do not—nervy!" she snapped.

He met her by appointment at eight o'clock, and at nine had managed the seduction. It was the first time, confided Effie, she had ever kissed a man with a beard.

After that he saw her often. She would come to his room after the Western Union released her from her insignificant duties, and she would sit for hours while he talked of himself. She was manna for Jake. Effie's satisfaction over knowing an artist, and a fellow on the *Courier*, too, was a form of flattery in itself, her admirable willingness to listen was all he needed—a sounding-board for his ego-vox—and to this she added cordiality at any time towards his baser moods. He could turn her passion on and off like a hot and cold spigot. Only about one thing was she obdurate, she must leave at mid-

night; her folks, who believed she worked late, were strict Methodists. Effie did not dance or play cards. She had been in a theater once.

However, her charms were limited to the simpler gestures, and when these had been experienced beyond the hope of surprise, Jake began to find his own conversation more exhilarating than sin stale with cheap powder and frequently grimy with carbon smut. The yearnings of the day surged for expression—soon he was doing more talking than love-making.

Of work, he did practically none.

"What you drawin', hon?" she always asked him.

He showed her.

"Shucks—I seen that," and she twitched away.

He did not care. In the office his anxiety for praise was a fever—if a printer chuckled at one of his sketches, he remembered it for days—but away from the radiance of others' haloes he recoiled from the notion of work. He was a fast draftsman. He had a knack for caricature. No task for Jake to make the small drawings for the sporting editor's column, to knock out the borders and dingbats which Butterfield shoved at him. He was allowed to do caricatures of notables at a convention, and even Packard grunted his approval. But—"You're not getting anywhere," warned Butterfield. "You ought to originate something—a stunt that'll get in the paper every day—a regular feature." Several ideas kindled—and died after half an hour's pen-

ciling. "You're lazy, Perry—do you know it?" decided Butterfield.

It was so much easier to leave ink and art gum at the office. So much more stimulating to snuff through strange old books and novels by new, iconoclastic Russians on the "restricted shelf" in the library. So much pleasanter to lounge about his room half dressed, flipping cigarette butts out the window, drinking beer, bragging, theorizing, mumbling, telling the world where to go to, occasionally reciting limericks about Jesus just to scare Effie. She would huddle in a corner of the bed with her hands over her ears and her knees to her chin, and if her blouse was torn, as it usually was, he could see her little breasts heaving. Then she was provocative. So much more delightful to seize her and tumble her until she panted under his fondling than to sit at a board and draw.

". . . now, look—you got me all messy. What'll my folks say?"

"Whatever they damn please. The trouble with you, Effie, is that you put too much value on appearances. So does everybody. If I choose never to shave and wear a beard to my knees, does that make me less intelligent than a sap with a college pompadour, and whose business is it? Some day I'm going to work in a jock strap just because it's cooler, and you'll meet me buck naked and we'll go to the movies. What will people say? What do I care what people say?"

"You do so! Why, that's the reason you wear funny clothes—so folks will notice you. . . ."

"Effie, you argue like a child—or a woman. I wear what I wear because I have to wear something and these garments happen to be handy. As a matter of fact, what you describe as funny clothes, in France and other civilized countries—but you wouldn't understand that . . ."

"Is that so? You're always sayin' I wouldn't understand somethin'—I'm goin' home."

"Mad, sweetheart? . . . You look like a cute little polecat. . . . Kiss Jakey. . . ."

Easy to be a lion to one's self and a mistress. Pleasant for a while. But unendurable for a true egoist, especially when the lady begins to pall and the world marvels before other zoos. Jake was in no real danger of slipping permanently into the indolence his body approved—his conceit wouldn't let him. It grew as it was clipped. It thrived with imprisonment. It was smarting him into a state bordering on authentic ambition. And Effie, ironically, was the accidental means of liberating it where it could command appreciation.

On the last day of Dora Devlin's trial for murder—a torrid August day that stretched the city gasping at sunset—the reporters waited the verdict in an anteroom to the court where Colonel Rourk R. Randolph had but lately wrung the walls to pity and the defendant, opportunely fainting in the midst of the prosecutor's rebuttal, had already re-

solved all bets save those on the number of minutes the jury would take to acquit her.

"One ballot," predicted Jeff Billups. "Then she'll be free to bang another guy. And before midnight I say she will."

"She can bang me any time she wants to," said Peter Braden. "She can hang her pretty li'l banger on my old banjo right now."

"You got more pep than I have after this trial, old son. Me—I'm gonna get cockeyed to-night—stinko—blind—'ory-eyed!"

"Jeff, you have moments of supreme inspiration," said Shag Kenny. "Speaking of drinks, who's got a drink?"

They died in a haze of smoke and perspiration, coats off, collars unslung, Brent still plowing across yards of copy paper, Latham droning the judge's charge into a dictaphone, Joe Armondale with telephone receivers clamped on both ears, snarling—"No—not yet—keep your shirt on— Naw, ain't a chance for conviction"—the three others bunched in the window where they could watch, outside under the dusty sycamores, the crowd keeping its vigil for the climax, the glimpse of celebrity whisked from the noose, the extras booming down onto the wilted city—"Dora Free! Dora Devlin Not Guilty! . . ."

Jake, hat on and sketch-book in his pocket, stood near the door. No need to hang around—his work was over, even to the anticipated drama, "sketched

in court by our staff artist," of Dora kissing the judge. Yet he lingered. Hot though it was, he hated the alternative of his lonely room to conversation which tolerated but did not include him.

"I'm gonna get cockeyed," repeated Jeff Billups.

"Who's got a drink?" said Shag Kenny. "Bill, you got a drink?"

Brent looked up, eyes glassy, and, without shaking his head, attacked paper again.

"Christ, some guys are too conscientious to let live. . . . Shall I kill him now, or wait till our readers request it? . . . I wish I had a drink. . . ."

Jake spoke, surprising even himself.

"You fellows want to drop by my room? . . . I've got some stuff . . . shipped in from Chattanooga. . . ."

The three by the window turned. . . . That fellow, Perry. That queer bird with the hat. That funny guy nobody seemed to know.

Said Shag Kenny: "Sure. If the rest—"

Feet pounded in the corridor, a door crashed. . . . "They're coming, boys! Coming! . . . The jury! . . ."

In the anteroom, Jake slouched alone. It was very hot and silent. New prickles of sweat burst in his beard. Should he wait? He wished, morosely, he had kept his mouth shut. They didn't want him. . . . Suddenly he heard a muffled hammering, a hush fell, then a great shout broke through doors and windows, and they were all around him—

"Hello! Hello! NOT GUILTY!—Let 'er go!—Not guilty!—*Not guilty!*—NOT GUILTY!—"

Kenny grabbed his arm. . . . "Where's that drink?"

Said Latham, affectedly: "Nice digs you've got here, Perry."

Joe Armondale sagged on the bed.

" 'Now fill the cup—' " said Shag Kenny.

Jake put two bottles and four glasses on the table.

"No ice—but if you want ginger ale or seltzer, holler. . . . Say when, boys—"

On the way along the street, the trial had usurped conversation. They had lost the others—"Let 'em go, the slaves!" said Kenny. "I'm sick of chasing that coozie. Say, Joe, did you see the look she gave the Old Man when he sailed into that 'soul of a leopardess' stuff? Nice little wren, this Dora, take it from me. . . ."

Jake strode with them, silently. Once his cane bumped Armondale, and he apologized.

But now, on their host's premises, there was a drift of awkwardness to the guests—Armondale muttered thanks as he took his drink, Latham strolled around, ostentatiously examining books and drawings, Kenny began to address his remarks to Jake.

"Oh, can the Devlin case! I've got a bellyful,"

said Armondale. "Say, Perry, when did you do that nigger stuff? It's damn good."

"Like it?" A glow was expanding through Jake; he ambled across the room, kicking a chair out of the way, unbuttoning his vest. . . . "Take off your coats, gents, it's hot as hell. . . . Why, that was down in south Georgia. I was bossing a gang of heeps in the turpentine belt. Mostly bluegum niggers—one step up from the apes. Once a week we opened a keg of corn for 'em and carted out a load of women from Jacksonville. When they got drunk, they did a sort of Congo dance and I sketched it."

It wasn't strictly true. Most of the drawings were from New Orleans police court, but at one time Dick Heldar, sketching the naked Zanzibari girls in a Port Said brothel, had been Jake's favorite fiction hero.

Jake was glad he had tacked up the pictures, for Latham had stopped peering at the books, Armondale was regarding him with a surprised look on his moon face—Kenny chuckled and poured another drink.

". . . This is damn good booze, Perry. . . . Say, I know those bluegum niggers. Once over in South Carolina . . ."

He told of a lynching in which the victim, a devout Baptist, was crucified by request instead of burned. Jake asked Armondale about Sam Bose's ear. Armondale described it to the last bloody

shred. They had another drink, and Latham said: "I see you read Huneker, Perry—great scout, Jim Huneker—ever hear about his affair with Mary Garden?" Latham told about Huneker's affair with Mary Garden, and Jake passed the bottle. . . . "Plenty more, boys, don't go easy with the whip. . . ."

Kenny told the story of the bride and groom on the Pullman.

Jake told the story about the man who looked like hell but felt fine.

Latham told the story Huneker told about the old boy who had one shot left in his rifle.

Jake passed the bottle. . . .

They were all coatless around the table, a breeze boomed across the roof tops, and Kenny was singing.

"Oh, my name it was Sam Hall
When I sailed! . . . . . ."

The glow was lifting and surging in Jake. It wasn't the liquor, he told himself, it was something else. His brain seemed sandpaper sharp. He could see that Kenny, taking his neat and two to the others' one, was getting drunk. Kenny sang, he kept smacking and unsmacking his hands; otherwise, steady as a church. Great fellow, Kenny—you don't impress him, you can see that, but he doesn't dislike you and he's having a time. . . . Latham's a piker, that last drink was practically

water. A fourflusher, too. But he sucked up to you . . . all that stuff about Huneker; bet he never read a line of Huneker in his life. . . . Armondale's all right. Duller than you thought he was, but a nice fellow . . . liked your drawings. . . . He's getting drunk, too. . . . Can't hold it like Kenny. . . . Well, let 'em get drunk. . . . Funny you don't feel it. . . .

"You're a gang of muckers all!
Damn your eyes!"

Armondale roared with Kenny. He gulped the inch in his glass.

"What time is it?—after eight?—By God, I've got to go. . . ."

"Don't be a nance all your life, Joe," said Kenny. "The wife'll give you hell, anyway."

They all laughed but Jake. They all seemed to know Armondale's wife.

"Drink up, gents!" said Jake.

He passed the bottle. Kenny and Armondale clashed glasses. Latham shook his head. Jake put water in his.

"Honest to Gawd, I gotta go."

"Aw, stick around. . . . We'll all go in a minute. We're all going somewhere and get something to eat. . . . Don't be a nance, Joe."

"Well—gimme a drink. . . . Who's a nance? . . . Latham's a nance. Why don't you drink your drink, Latham? Come on, bottoms up!"

Latham shook his head again.

"You go too fast for me. You Southerners go too damn fast!"

Armondale and Kenny howled. They included Jake, grinning, in their fraternity.

"Come on, bottoms up! . . . Latham's a Yankee nance. Well, he's one of Patton's kept women, anyway. Why don't you be an honest woman, Latham —come over on the *Courier* with me and Joe and Perry? . . . Honest, hard-working street-walker on the *Courier*. . . ."

Latham smiled. Jake grinned at Latham. He was glowing. He liked Latham now.

Armondale stared into his glass.

"I want a woman," he said suddenly.

"'Atta boy, Joe!" shouted Kenny.

Jake slapped Armondale on the back.

"Stick around, Joe. . . . Maybe one'll show up."

They all looked at Jake. Skepticism flamed in their eyes—and the wish to believe.

"No kidding," said Jake.

Yet they were surprised when Effie knocked on the door at nine o'clock.

"Hello, kid," said Jake. "Meet Joe, Shag—Jack." He winked at them over her head as he tousled it. "This is Effie. . . ."

Effie sat down on the bed, and Armondale got up and sat down beside her.

"Hello, honeybunch," said Armondale.

The rest grinned. Armondale put his arm around her. She slapped it off. He put it back. "Nervy!" said Effie, and let it stay. Everybody laughed. . . .

Kenny and Latham were gone. Jake sat on his backbone in the big chair, holding onto the arms with both hands, and stared at Effie and Armondale on the bed. They were locked in a kiss, he could see a long rip in Effie's blouse under her elbow, tightened around Armondale's neck. Jake had no idea what time it was. He felt cold sober. Kenny and Latham must have been gone a long time.

When Armondale got up to go to the bathroom, "How are you, kid?" Jake said. . . . "Have another drink, Effie." He goggled at her under drawn brows. "Listen, Effie—that guy—he's a good friend of mine. He's a great scout, Effie. Star reporter on the *Courier*. You don't mind, do you, Effie? You don't mind a good friend of mine? . . ."

She stared back at him, she giggled and shook her head. She had drunk a lot, too.

Jake got up and went to the door.

"—cigarettes," he mumbled.

The room was dark when, toward daybreak, he returned. He struck a match. Cigarette butts, stale drinks, spilled drinks. Two empty bottles, a third half full. Armondale's hat was crushed on the bed. Jake picked it up and dusted it off and put it carefully on top his own. He stood at the window,

watching the gray light crawl across the rooftops. His head ached badly, but the glow mounted in his veins. Far off a rooster crowed, the tocsin cawed from throat to throat in the dawn, and Jake could have trumpeted with them. He hit the bed without removing his shoes.

Armondale was remorseful.

"What the hell?" said Jake. . . . "She's not bad—huh?"

They went to lunch together.

Shag Kenny stopped him in the hall. He put his hand on Jake's shoulder. "Say—know what that guy Latham did?" It was a lengthy and humorous post-mortem.

Two nights later, with Peter Braden and the sporting editor of the *Blade*, they all got tight at the Elks' Street Carnival.

Effie, Jake did not see for three weeks. Then she came to him weeping. Her family had been awful mad at her that night, she had lost her job, now she feared she was pregnant.

"Why pick on me?" said Jake, and looked at her stonily.

Nevertheless, he advised her what to take. It must have worked, for she didn't bother him any more. A year later, on Bledsoe Street, a girl smiled at him. He didn't recognize her under the rouge—it was Effie. My God! how thin she is! He cut her dead.

III

THE IDEA ORIGINALLY WAS ARMONDALE'S. IT WAS inspired partly by Jake's negro drawings, partly by familiarity with police court characters, and partly by an office argument over the prattle in the Sunday *Blade* of that sprightly mystery, Cherie Cherokee.

Miss Cherokee, bubbling into Corinth with Patton's transformation of the *Blade*, had stirred up controversy by her pert handling of goings-on in high circles. The name, like that of society chroniclers in Patton papers everywhere, was fanciful, confected from Cherokee Avenue, Corinth's principal thoroughfare—Cherie was generally believed to be "Wild Ed" Flannery himself. But whoever she was, she wrote with inside knowledge and considerable impudence. Hoi polloi for the first time got entrancing tattletales of the noblesse; the noblesse, who had never hoped for attention save in the most decorous rhetoric, were not too enraged; and among the *Blade's* competitors was much wailing that even her detractors devoured Cherie Cherokee's Chatter of Society every Sunday.

"Listen to this," scoffed Armondale, one Saturday night, folding back the pre-date edition of the *Blade* where it lay fresh on the managing editor's desk—" 'Quite the gayest dog at the annual bench show of the Corinth Kennel Club was our own Clark Burton, to whom Cherie must award a special blue ribbon for champion in the chivalry class'— My God, have you ever seen our Clark?—And Packard calls this bunk good!"

"You're reading it, ain't you?" retorted Bill Brent.

"Yes—and if I couldn't write better stuff, I'd shoot myself."

"Just the same, Mr. Packard would give six of you for one feature that pulled like Cherie Cherokee. Get wise, Joe—do a society column—latest scandal in the Jericho Street Smart Set—that's about your social speed, big boy!"

What Cherokee Avenue was to white Corinth, Jericho Street was to black—a raucous, odorous, light-hearted, bellicose jungle not many jumps removed from tribal Africa. Since Armondale's hours were spent largely in the quest of Jericho Street's whimsies and frenzies, its murders and its jubilees, its dark jesters and its darker rogues, Brent's jeer was pointed.

But the jeer pricked more than Armondale's vanity—a few days later he stopped at Packard's desk with a sheet of bristol board and several typewritten pages.

"What the devil—"

The managing editor scowled at a panorama of dogs and darkies cavorting under bold letters:

GERRY JERICHO'S JABBER OF SOCIETY

"Read the stuff, Mr. Packard," pleaded Armondale.

Packard read: "Quite the gayest dog at the annual bench show of the Darktown Kennel Club, which was hell last week by the younger set, was our own Bobo Sweet, the lad with the bloodhound smile. Until Bobo started the custom of breaking into the dances with brass knucks, Gerry was tempted to award him a special blue ribbon in the chivalry class. But, say I, it is carrying the cavalier spirit too far to ask for the next waltz with a short uppercut to the chin—"

A bilious grin escaped the managing editor.

"Who did the drawing?"

"I got Perry to do it."

"Not bad. . . . Wait here, I want to show this to the Colonel."

So the *Courier*, not above lampooning a rival's successful but vulnerable spot, on the following Sunday and each Sunday thereafter entertained Corinth with Gerry Jericho's Jabber of Society. It was crude, rough parody, abounding in references to dice games, fish fries, bricks, razors, high browns, low yellows, pan-toters, coke-sniffers and

thirty days in the chain-gang. But Corinth laughed, for text and pictures, no matter how exaggerated, were in the sacred Southern tradition that made every nigger a scamp or a clown and his woman a mammy or a slut. The niggers themselves laughed, being a tolerant race, society laughed because it did not do to take Cherie Cherokee too seriously, and the very producers of Cherie Cherokee laughed, since everybody continued to read her as hard as ever.

From all this pleasantry Jake Perry profited more than anyone else, first in a salary boost and second in prestige that was water to the burning. He moved from the room over the laundry, he acquired a Panama hat and a purple vest and a blue vest, and he abandoned his hermit pose for a livelier and more gratifying rôle.

In Corinth flattery was a tenet as honored as hospitality, and Jake suddenly discovered the joys of celebrity. People in shops looked up, surprised and pleased, when he gave his name. The teller who cashed his pay check, his laundryman, his landlord, his barber, treated him as a great man. They were always telling him how funny his stuff was last Sunday. He got more glory from Gerry Jericho than Armondale did; and, if certain heedless souls confused author with artist, he did not bother to set them straight. Even in the office he was now a person. Colonel Main, the *Courier's* owner, nodded

to him on the elevator, Mr. Packard began talking about a daily cartoon, to the members of the staff he was no longer that funny bozo with the beard, but Jake Perry, a regular fellow, who dressed that way because he was a genius.

The drunken postscript to the Devlin trial had crashed the gates of journalistic masonry for Jake, and Gerry Jericho lifted him well inside. Here he found a companionship which satisfied both his natural gregariousness and his belief in Jake, the marked man. For the group, as he saw it, was a marked group, rebels and bravos set apart from the burghers, and in the group he was at once a figure.

Popularity, though he had striven for it, surprised him a little. Such fellows as Kenny and Latham and Ed Flannery, got into the habit of dropping by his place. They included him in the drinking bouts at the "social clubs" infesting Corinth under local prohibition. Moreover, they listened to him, half enamored, half derisive of his heresies, and if some of them reacted as intelligently as Effie, he nevertheless ate up their resentment along with their cheers.

"You're stinking liars," he would taunt. "You say one thing, and not one of you has the courage of a doodle-bug to go through with it. Look at Latham—he says what he most wants in life is beauty. So he works for a rag that drags beauty

in the muck ten times a day. He hasn't got the guts to pursue beauty, granting he'd know it if he saw it. Look at Joe there—he says he wants peace and contentment, the house-by-the-side-of-the-road stuff. Bunk! He'd sell his mortgage on Utopia tomorrow for a five hundred dollar check from George Horace Lorimer. Shag Kenny's almost honest—he wants to be Omar Khayyám and drink himself to death. But the damn fool knows in his heart he doesn't envy Omar his booze and barmaids; he'd like to have his poetry read at the Tuesday meeting of the Corinth Woman's Club. Fame—money—swill! A lot of pigs rooting for swill and grunting beautiful grunts about roses and sunsets!"

"And what do you want, young fellow?"

"I don't know—life, I suppose. I want everything you want—fame, money, liquor, women, beautiful swill. But I know it's swill, see? Some day I'll want something else. I'll retire to a monastery and wrestle out the Big Perhaps with the angels. And when I find out what I want, by God, I'll damn the torpedoes and go ahead! What I want, I'll take!"

"Yeh? . . . You got that out of a book."

"What you want you take, huh? . . . Listen, sonny, you lay off my gal or you'll never catch-as-catch-can with no angels!"

"Jake the Fake! Right now you don't want anything except a lot of damn fools listening to you holler!"

"Oh, all right—ride me. But I'm honest enough—"

"Oh, dry up!"

He never questioned their interest or their luster. If Armondale haunted his room, it was not because Armondale couldn't afford club drinks and was putting off as long as possible return to Mrs. Armondale's shrill yoke. If Bill Brent called him a crazy damn fool, it wasn't because Bill Brent read nothing but the newspapers. If most of the Argonauts beneath their professional doughface were commonplace fellows who found Jake a novelty and his quarters an escape from home and families, he was too pleased with himself to know it. Didn't Brent call the Mayor "Charlie," Armondale write fiction for magazines, Kenny drink like a very Falstaff? They were still Argonauts all, and with them he strode the decks. . . .

With them, in the office, he bet and cursed and vilified the city's sacred cows. With them, on assignments, he worked as one of them, and frequently stole the suicide's picture while a reporter comforted the bereaved wife. With them he had entrée to a score of boozing joints, and there he shot dice, drank, boasted, fought, danced with the amateur prostitutes, and in the dawn went whooping "down the line" to strut the hellion in the parlors of the less demanding sisterhood.

They were the newspaper boys, this was the free life, and through it stalked Jake Perry, a lion of

the lions, his beard a mane—a little cracked, they say, even grotesque; but then, aren't all of us crazy in our business?

Summer died, fall and the big football games rioted in and out, Corinth shivered through ten weeks of sleet and grippe, and in March Jake took up golf at the new public links. In the same month —so he dated it afterwards—there fell on him a curious discontent which was to recur at wide intervals all his life and which, at each recurrence, he was to view with a superstitious fatalism.

It was compounded of a savage elation along with melancholy. It incited him to dominate conversations, and at other times to sit glumly in a crowd. He fought it, for there was no reason for it. Was he not successful, popular, untrammeled? He should feel confident and strong. Yet here he gnawed his soul exactly as he had in old moments of humiliation and misery. . . . When he was six and the teacher made him sit in shamed isolation because he had wet his pants. . . . The first time he ever begged on the street. . . . The beating by that little jockey. . . . His early days on the *Courier* before he was one of the boys. . . . The same feeling then; the same feeling now.

But now he was not lonely, humbled, defeated. Why should this spirit of purposeless envy still rankle?

He brooded in his office—his own, his private office—while Armondale outlined the subject for

next Sunday's Gerry Jericho. Once started, Jake drew with uncanny speed, and with Armondale providing the idea and the spur each time, even Butterfield had stopped complaining that Jake was more than ordinarily lazy.

"I think," said Armondale, "we'll have a tea dance—one of those things Cherie Cherokee wrote about last Sunday—a *thé dansant*, they call 'em. Given by the Darktown Stylish Club for a visiting Pullman porter—lot of couples pushing around—women dressed like all get-out—gents in jimswingers, suspenders, overalls, anything—razor rucus over in the corner—one burhead stopping a cobblestone with her face—pair in the middle of the floor cutting a mean step—you get the idea, Jake?"

"Sure, I get the idea." He wished Armondale would go away and leave him alone.

"Well—and put in those dogs again, will you? They're funny."

"All right . . . if I find a spot."

Armondale fuddled around.

"Watch out!" said Jake sharply. "You'll spill that ink. . . ."

"Aw, what the hell? I hadn't touched it. . . . You're getting crabby as an old woman. . . . Going home soon?"

Jake shook his head.

"Going to the Press Club?"

"No."

"Oh, all right, keep your damn secrets! I'm blowing. . . ."

He blew.

Jake began penciling the figures familiar to *Courier* readers—fat nigger, thin nigger, dude nigger, nigger with the big feet, nigger with the 'possum hounds, nigger dowager, nigger débutante, nigger vamp—but soon he flung the board from him and put his feet across the desk. This damn junk—why did he do it? What the devil was the matter with him, anyway? He was blue as hell. . . .

It had begun back there with the Newspaper Men's Golf Tournament, when he played with Harrison Traylor. He hadn't known Traylor before—an older man who peered at Jake over gold-rimmed spectacles and shook hands solemnly. Traylor was editorial writer on the *Morning Star*. A recluse, Jake presumed, for he had never seen Traylor "around" and chaps like Pete Braden, though working in the same office, did not mention him. Besides, he looked all of forty and anyone over thirty-five was practically dead in Jake's estimation. It was going to be a dull eighteen holes. . . .

But Traylor surprised him.

Jake had sneered at golf—"for old men and Elks"—until its growth in Corinth hatched a municipal course, invaded all classes and sent even Shag Kenny weaving to the open. So, with the other iconoclasts, Jake played golf, and having a virile body as well as a desire to shine, became an en-

thusiast with his first decent drive. In a week he was telling others what was the matter with their stance and grip. Golf no longer was "an old man's game"—he would take this grandpa over the bumps.

At the end of the first four holes, when Traylor was three up, Jake said: "Say, what do you play this course in, Mr. Traylor?"

"Never played it before. Best I ever did at West Lake was eighty."

"Oh, West Lake!"

So Traylor played at West Lake. Played regularly, no doubt. Must have been playing there a good while, for dubs did not drive two hundred yards every time and rarely take three putts, nor get eighties at West Lake. The best nine Jake had to date over the easy public links was a fifty-three. So Traylor was one of that West Lake bunch.

Why the fact should impress him was not clear in Jake's own mind. West Lake was just a country club and not as exclusive as the Corinth Club or Fair Oaks, he had heard. There was nothing remarkable about the editorial writer of the *Morning Star* belonging to West Lake. Only, somehow, he had thought of all the newspaper boys as playing at the public links. Of course, Traylor wasn't "one of the boys"—he was an old man. . . .

"I've never played at West Lake."

"No? It's a tough course." Traylor teed his ball carefully. "You'll have to come out with me

some time. We have a set foursome Sundays—Doc Stengel and Colonel Randolph and Jim Packard—but if you're free some day during the week . . ."

"I'd like to very much."

Had he said that too quickly? For an instant, while Traylor was teeing the ball, he had a feeling that Traylor was hesitating, was peering at him over those spectacles. For Christ's sake, was there anything funny the matter with him? . . . So Traylor played with big guns like Dr. Stengel and Roark Randolph and Mr. Packard. . . . Aw, to hell with Traylor! . . .

But, at the finish of the match on the twelfth green, he was very glad to accept Traylor's invitation to a drink. They went in Traylor's car—so Traylor had a car? he must make a cracking good salary on the *Star*—to Traylor's home on the North Side, and Mrs. Traylor, who was pretty and did not seem at all old, brought mint juleps to the porch of the bungalow, and they talked.

They talked a lot about books, and Jake recovered his assurance, for he had read more than any man he knew. But again Traylor surprised him. Traylor quoted Shakespeare with unbelievable relish, yet with a gusto that made the old boy's stuff sound almost good. And Traylor discussed the moderns, too—O. Henry was a joke-smith, Winston Churchill a preacher, America had had no writers since Mark Twain except an obscure fellow named Dreiser. Jake demurred; how about Tarkington

and David Graham Phillips? They argued violently while Mrs. Traylor beamed.

"Don't mind him," she said to Jake, "he's an old fogy." Under his beard he blushed with the notion that Mrs. Traylor was teasing him rather than her husband.

When he left, the Traylors invited him to call, and for fifteen minutes, returning to town on a street car, he was gay. But in his room, morosely trimming his whiskers, he seemed to feel Traylor's eyes scrutinizing him, and savagely he assured his image that Traylor was an ass and the pair of them a couple of ancient fatheads.

That night, for no cause, he got drunker than in months, and in Daisy Hepburn's house on Magnolia Street tied a girl to the bed-post with the sheets. Only Ed Flannery's blarney and twenty dollars for the linen, saved him from jail.

And the next morning that senseless depression crushed him. It wasn't merely a hangover—it went deeper and it clung for days.

He had it now—sober, unweary, clear headed—in the middle of a perfect April afternoon—with his feet on his desk and not a worry on earth save to ink a few splatters that would tickle fifty thousand people and cause not a few of them to say, "By golly, Perry, that certainly was a funny Gerry Jericho you had last Sunday!"

He wished they were going to compliment him about something else. He wished he was not an

artist. He wished he was not on the *Courier*. He wished he was a chap with money. He wished he could play golf whenever he wanted to. He wished he was playing golf now . . . out at West Lake . . . with Hal Traylor. . . . Oh, hell, it was foolishness to have the blues.

Probably Traylor wouldn't ask him again, not after that last time. Yet his behavior, whether Traylor liked it or not, had been exemplary. Dammit, it had been courageous in a way!—A fellow had to stand by his principles . . . stick up for his friends. . . .

They had gone out on a Saturday afternoon, Traylor and Mr. Packard and Martin Starr, an advertising writer, and after eighteen holes, Jake had been the Traylors' guest for dinner and the dance. Golf was glorious. Jake shot a ninety-four and won sixty cents from Packard. Mr. Packard himself, away from the office, was unexpectedly amiable save when he dubbed his mashie shots. Starr took a shine to Jake, praised his drawing, said Jake must do some stuff for the Ajax Agency. He was as young as Jake, popping with energy, handsome and a snappy dresser, and they said he made ten thousand a year. . . . Jake expanded and rejoiced. He drove the last water hazard dead to the pin.

And then, over drinks in the locker room, occurred one of those arguments which seem trivial in retrospect but at the moment flare bitterly.

Packard, talking shop, mentioned the name of Jack Latham.

"That roughneck," said Traylor promptly. "If I ever meet him face to face, I'm going to tell him what I think of him."

Jake put down his glass. "You don't know him?"

"No—and I don't want to. I've heard all I need to about that young hooligan."

"Why? What did he ever do to you?"

"Nothing. But he insulted my daughter. He was at one of these college dances, and if what my wife tells me is true, his language in front of the girls was absolutely foul."

Jake laughed. "Oh, come on—I heard about that. He was a little plastered and told an off-color story."

Traylor's gaze above his spectacles was icy. "A gentleman never gets so drunk that he forgets he is a gentleman."

"But a risqué story doesn't make a man a roughneck."

"You may approve of dirty stories in mixed company, Perry—I don't. I don't tell them, and I wouldn't stand by while another man told one before my wife, or my daughter, or any other lady."

"Why not?" A devil of crankiness pricked Jake. He told himself he was not exasperated by Traylor's holiness—he was defending Jack Latham. "So-called dirty stories are merely applying a bit of humor to facts of life everybody knows. Girls

these days don't live in nunneries. Most of them not only enjoy dirty stories, they tell 'em."

"I congratulate you on your friends," said Traylor acidly.

"Thanks." Jake burned. "At least they have some intelligence and some wit. They don't consider Leonardo's Anatomy of Love a nasty picture and the Decameron fodder for a bonfire. Dirt for dirt's sake and dirt for art's sake, are two different matters. But you probably don't consider amusing conversation one of the arts."

Packard interrupted.

"Pull up, Perry. Traylor's absolutely right. Trouble with you young ruffians on the paper, you've lost all sense of proportion, let alone common decency. Let's go downstairs."

It was the managing editor who spoke, in the managing editor's voice. Jake swallowed further brilliance at its foaming.

But he was sore. He was sore even after Martin Starr winked and whispered on the stairs, "Traylor thinks the girls play lotto at the frat dances." He was sore all through dinner, disgruntled and abashed and consciously boorish in the face of Traylor's punctilious courtesy. Nor did the presence of Miss Letitia Traylor, a bony, effusive, argus-eyed gosling, at all buoy his spirits. He verged between chagrin and malicious pleasure in wondering whether Traylor feared he would soil her ears at the first opportunity.

The candid young woman completed his ruin by advising him, while they sat out a dance, to assassinate his beard.

"You're too young for it," she assured him blithely. "It makes you look silly. Mama and papa think so, too."

He tried to think of the dirtiest story he had ever heard—and failed in the double percussion of wrath and misery.

Only Miss Beth Wimbish helped a little to restore his high feather. She was small and plump, and he liked tall women, but when they danced, her head was thrilling below his shoulders and her lightness made him feel gracefully masterful. She said, "You're an artist, aren't you?—I saw you, one night, making sketches at the basketball game." Then, disconcertingly, "You look so nice and old in that beard—I'm awfully tired of young men—please, it's real, isn't it?" He advised her to pull it, but she shook her head—"Then you'd be like all the rest if it came off"—and he divined that, for all her directness, she was not one for easy approaches. She was merry, she teased and enticed, yet there was no more malice in her merriment than there was design in her coquetry, and if she was a finer breed of cat than his accustomed pets, she unquestionably found him interesting, and Jake was flattered and soothed. They danced four times, and when she sent him away, she patted his arm and said, "I'm going to call you Jiggs—Jake used to be our

gardener's name and he was sweet but quite colored —you comin' to see me?" In exactly one dance, he said, but she ordered him to stay away "or Tish Traylor'll think I'm no nice girl."

So he stayed away long enough to lose her entirely to another man, after which the thought of Miss Traylor was revolting. He had retired to the locker room and whisky, leaving the Traylors to depart unaccompanied and unrequited. . . . No, decidedly Harrison Traylor would not invite him to West Lake again. . . . And probably that awful daughter had queered him with Miss Wimbish and the whole society bunch—

Well, what of it? Traylor and Packard and company were a lot of imitation snobs who had sold their birthrights for a mulligan of respectability. He didn't envy them their clubs and their cars and their blue-nosed women—certainly he didn't. They could take their holier-than-thou air and stuff it up their noses. Maybe there were some newspapermen as hidebound and dull as a churchful of deacons, but by god! he didn't want to know them. Give him the old gang and the old life. To the devil with Traylor!

The telephone rang.

Jake's feet thumped.

"Hello! . . . Oh, how are you, Mrs. Traylor? . . . Well, that's mighty nice of you, but I'm not much good at bridge. . . . Oh, no, it isn't that, I'd be delighted if you think . . . Miss Wimbish?

Surely, I'd be delighted. . . . At eight o'clock, yes ma'am. . . . Not at all, I'm delighted that you asked me. . . ."

He hung up, thinking, "Blast it! Couldn't you think of another word but delighted?"

He glanced at his watch, reflecting that he'd better beat it home and see if he had a clean white shirt, and while he was locking his door and morbidly wondering whether the Misses Traylor and Wimbish had been discussing his beard, he remembered that he had a dinner date with Jack Latham.

"Oh, to hell with Latham!" he said aloud.

It was a decision unthinkable a year ago to the cub artist of the *Courier*. And he made it now, after these months of fraternity, without conscious reasoning that he, the vaunted monotype, was but one among many metals in the same font, "a typical newspaper man," and squirming under a classification suddenly become ignoble. Reasoning was to come later. It would be provoked by an ordeal approaching rapidly but deceptively to a ta-ra-ta of trumpets.

IV

On the veranda of the Cherokee Terrace, far out from Corinth's lesser hotels, Jake and the loveliest Mimi of them all laughed from adjoining rockers at Enrico Caruso and Antonio Scotti in mimic combat on the lawn.

Caruso, the magnificent schoolboy—in white flannel trousers, blue coat, emerald hose, emerald tie and enormous Panama hat slashed with an emerald band. It was his fourth costume of the day and it was not yet noon. Three times since ten o'clock he had retired to his valet, three times returned to dazzle the worshipers with fresh raiment.

Scotti, though no less splendid, must have deemed one outfit enough for his first morning in the South. He wore, meditated Jake, the same pants he had worn for the last two hours.

Gold poured from the sky's deeps on Cherokee Avenue, on clipped turf, on bursts of lilac and dogwood and hydrangea, on the bright huddles of women and men spilled on the veranda, on the photographers hunched over their black boxes, on the two duelists statuesque on the greensward.

"*En garde!*" shouted Caruso, and lunged with a cigarette holder nine inches long.

"*Touche!*" cried Scotti. His bamboo stick whirled through the sunlight. He flopped on his back, heels waving.

Caruso advanced, placed an immaculate toe on Scotti's chest, adjusted creases and folded his arms.

"*Vive la victoire!*" crowed the supreme tenor.

"Hold it!" yelled the photographers.

There was a whirr of shutters.

The loveliest Mimi rocked back, clapping her hands, and silver merriment burnished the April gold.

"*Mon brave! Mon beau chevalier!* . . . Aren't they a riot?" she demanded of Jake. "Scotti's so sweet . . . he always gives in."

"You are adorable!" he yearned to pant. . . . "They sure are," he said.

This was one of those rare moments that made journalism, after all, a kingly profession. The world's greatest singers cutting monkeyshines at his feet, Euterpe radiant but a breath away, and a herd of outlaws—nay, a whole populace—standing enviously in the distance.

He owed the moment to enterprise whereby, with much whooping and a thumping guarantee, Corinth had gone shamelessly cultured and persuaded the Metropolitan Opera Company to give a "little season" in the South after the final New York performance. To-night, in the city audito-

rium, Rodolfo would charm his thousands; to-day the newspaper boys gleaned for those thousands the lowdown on Rodolfo's choice in suspenders and his opinions of our climate, our skyline and our beautiful girls.

The star reporters had met the early train and recorded to the last ballet girl the arrival of the Northern songbirds in our sunny Southland. They had interviewed Italians about Wagner and Germans about Verdi. Storming the Cherokee Terrace, they had coaxed before the camera, with very little argument, divas and maestros who buck-danced and kissed and ate watermelon and shook hands with the Mayor and executed antics they would never have been asked to do for the New York papers. The harvest would be stacked in many columns in the Corinth press, saving the one real story of the day, when de Segurola punched a bellboy for grinning at his monocle. This would be suppressed, courteously.

Jake's job was to make intimate sketches of the stars. Especially was he to sketch the loveliest Mimi, for among these great, none so bewitched our music lovers as she whose voice had led her not only to fame but to scandal, and even, it was gossiped, to royalty's bed.

She was, he thought, a goddess—an earthy goddess of eyes and lips and skin that lured like a magnet charged with blades of passion.

And he had not meant to think so. In his own

white flannels, with a stick as flippant as Scotti's and a hat as rakish as Caruso's, he had ventured on this assignment no less cynically than the other boys. . . . A lot of dagoes glorified because god gave them good larynxes. A lot of society posers gushing over them . . . trying to be highbrow . . . yipping about Puccini. What do they know about Puccini? What do the wops know except to bawl loudest at the wrong places? Well, here they come . . . Clatter . . . Crush . . . Babble . . . "Say, Mr. Guard, you gotta picture of this Marie whatshername? Who's this Ziegler? What does he sing? Where's Caruso? Who's the fat gal? . . . Lamp that honey with the spats! Bet she's in the ballet. . . . Now, Madam, if you'll let the maid take the dog and step over here. . . . Hey, Jake, how do you spell Aïda? . . . Naw, she ain't a contralto, she's a mezzo-soprano. . . . Come on, let's beat it to the Terrace. Caruso's there. Caruso and . . . Sure, we can get a drink. . . . Sure, she had a kid by the Crown Prince. . . . Sure, but they say she's nuts about . . ."

He had not meant to be impressed by any of these screaming peacocks, bewildered by the slightest question, hysterical over baggage, insulting you one minute and begging to have their picture taken the next . . . gods to some people, but not to him. Thrilled, yes. With the world stopping while Galli posed for him? With society girls gaping in the lobby as he buttonholed Caruso? Who wouldn't get

a thrill out of it? Yet coolly he loafed across the veranda. Coolly, through the hubble-bubble, he swung his cane. Coolly he sketched Caruso—and throttled the puff in his chest while Caruso sketched him. . . . Caruso was a good guy . . . but a fool . . . a vain fool. . . .

He was nonchalant even when he went to the house 'phone, drawled, "Mr. Perry, staff artist of the *Courier* . . . I'm downstairs . . . can you see me for a moment?" and, when silver fluttered his ear-drums, sneered to Albert Perkins, "Says she'll come down in half an hour—probably take that long to lace her corset!"

And then she had come out to them suddenly, April's lady in a frock of apple green, and as she swayed there with the warm shadow caught under the picture hat and eyes starbright in that dim cup, all his excitement flared in a gust and all the tales he had heard of her seemed to drain into a thin, sharp volt flickering from her to him. . . . "If you were queen of pleasure and I were king of pain." . . . She was Romance, she was Enchantment. Yet she was a girl, a slim, laughing American girl who shook hands like a boy and said, "I'm starved to death . . . lead me to that barbecue!"

. . . And now she was going. Going before he could grip a pencil. Going scarcely before he had muttered his request. For first the photographers had pounced on her. Then the reporters must ask a thousand silly questions. Then she must applaud

those two baboons on the lawn. And he had lagged, half abashed and half with a hazy notion that they two would retire from the multitude to a nook where in swift lines he would imprison her beauty and, looking into those starbright eyes, ignite in them with a few simple words the wonder that here, in Corinth, was a mind and a man. . . .

"And now I must dash. . . . Come, you two fire eaters! . . . It is food awaits. *Vivres!* Victuals! . . . Come, Scotti!"

"But the sketch . . . Only a few minutes . . . If you only will . . . Please, I must have it for to-morrow's paper!"

Starbright eyes declared sweet distress while Scotti attended, bronze urbanity.

"Of course . . . and I was about to forget! Let me see"—puckered brows ravished him. . . . "I can't keep all those people waiting. . . . I'll tell you! . . . You come to the barbecue, Mr. Perry! Come later, when it will be practically over, and we'll have things to ourselves. You know where it is? At one of the clubs, isn't it? And you'll come? . . . Promise?"

He would have promised her his head, beard and all, on a platter with pork and Brunswick stew.

"That's splendid. . . . Now, bambina!"

They were gone, the sun put out in a puff of gas, and a girl somewhere behind Jake giggled. He gave her—he hoped she was the giggler—the ugliest stare he could contrive, slapped his sketchbook

under his arm, and walked away jauntily, whistling "Red Wing" between his teeth.

What happened to Jake that afternoon at the Fair Oaks Country Club, and what devilish situation the happening spread for him that night, must be ascribed not alone to Jake's nature, his conceit and a will to triumph that became a sort of demoniac virtue when it was roused, but to the nature of the community itself, to a mass state of mind which, in a city smaller than Corinth, would have starved to death for lack of provender, and in a larger would have crumbled before lustier competing states of mind. Corinth was snobbish as only a city can be that has outgrown the friendly country town stage and has not yet attained the variegation of the cosmopolis. It was like a haughty little girl in a new coat who snubs other little girls in yesterday's shabby dresses, including the younger sisters in her own house. And, like haughty but impressionable little girls, Corinth was capable of getting an insane "crush" on something or some one that appeared beautiful or clever or awful, regardless of whether the "crush" was really any of these things, and of pursuing the "crush" blindly, jealously, whole-heartedly.

Metropolitan Grand Opera was Corinth's crush-of-the-month. Newspaper men, those determined skeptics, might hoot the "little season" as they would any other civic ballyhoo, but on the rest of the population Grand Opera descended with the

magic of an Elks' carnival. It was an all-embracing affair. Business hopped to it because opera week was as good for business as circus week. Society laid itself out to dazzle and to lionize. Patriots seized the chance to boom town, state and self. A number of unusual folk looked forward to hearing good music. But that didn't much matter . . . whether you knew the difference between an intermezzo and a coloratura—if you were a mere clerk, you read up on the "libretto," bought a record of the Lucia sextette, hired a dress-suit and took your girl to the auditorium. If she asked too many questions, you could always crack a smart one about going to the "grand uproar." The whole jamboree was not unlike some big athletic event. The town had grabbed the Met from other towns—won the pennant. We are proud and happy and burning with loyalty to put over the series with a bang. Wake, Patriotism! At 'em, Hospitality! Let's go, famous "Corinth Spirit!" Lines in front of ticket windows. Tiaras and ostrich feather fans. Coca Cola through a straw between the acts. See those stars—Ty Cobb or Caruso, both great boys! Hear that roar—a home run or an aria! For it's grand, grand opera, and if you can't get in the ball park, you can root outside for the Italian composers against the Germans, and read in the papers how the bleachers yelled when Carmen came to bat.

Jake, like everyone else in Corinth who could make the grade, was going to the opening night of

opera. He was going on press tickets, and they were good ones. He was going in a dress-suit and a high hat. But he was not going as a clerk would go to the "uproar," or even as other high hats would go, because "everybody was going" or because their wives dragged them out or out of a sense of civic duty.

In New Orleans, Jake had hung often from the gallery of the old French Opera House, staring at a stage luminous with the phantoms of half a century, listening to melody that stirred him as no wild vanity of his own had ever done. Grand Opera, he told himself, was no circus parade to him, he was schooled in its lore, sensitized to its beauties, he "understood" it. Moreover, once a touring company had presented to his extreme rapture the comparatively new "La Bohème." Never had music so thrust itself into his vitals—he loved and rollicked with the four inseparables, Mimi's little hands kindled in his—and though now he was a bit beyond starving in attics and could even shrug at Puccini, "that soft sentimentalist," announcement that the Metropolitan would begin its Corinth program with "Bohème" had excited him amazingly, and more than a week ahead he had laid careful plans.

They centered around his companion for the evening. Almost daily since the bridge game at the Traylors' Jake had seen or telephoned Beth Wimbish. He had taken her every Monday night to

Keith vaudeville at the Mayfair, they had joined the fashionable parade for ices afterward at Brundage's, he had danced with her again at West Lake, motored in the Wimbish car, dined at the Wimbish home. He was, after the approved local tradition, "rushing" her, and opera was his *coup de grace.*

Exactly what her charm for him was, and exactly where it was driving him, Jake characteristically avoided analyzing. A flash he recognized had beckoned him on, and when he drew close, it was not a "go" signal, but a "stop." Beth liked him, she liked him a lot, she could listen as flatteringly as Effie and then make him her little boy with a "Jiggs lamb" tenderer than all Effie's "hons," yet if he dared a caress he woke at once a wide-eyed sentinel who abashed him. The truth was that for the first time in his life he enamored a thoroughbred maiden whose very spotlessness enamored him, and he was a little afraid. Certainly marriage was an unthinkable bogey. Yet woo her he must. He must take her to "La Bohème." He must sit beside her when the voice of Caruso soared in the "Narrative," and throughout "Thou Sweetest Maiden" hold her hand. She would call him "Jiggs," and in the *entr'acte* they would parade, becomingly, before the boxes.

So Jake had contemplated his little exhibition for days, even to Beth's tear which would splash his

coat-sleeve when Mimi died. That very morning he had telephoned her to ask whether she preferred orchids or roses.

But, from the moment on the hotel veranda when April's lady dulled the sunshine, the direction of his fancies changed. The opera still sparkled, if possible more glamorous than ever, but he ceased to think whether Beth would wear pearls or sacking, he no longer demanded that her little hands should be cold, and all his industry shifted to the painting of a different set of pictures.

He saw a pair of starbright eyes beneath Mimi's saucy bonnet, he saw a slender body in apple green flash before the Café Momus, shiver among the snowflakes at the Barrier d'Enfer, nestle into Rodolfo's arms. And somehow, though Jake's voice was no robusto's and his yearnings had never included the stage, the lover of these scenes underwent a transformation and, starting as the fat tenor he had seen in New Orleans, became a lank youth in a blond beard and an old green vest. From then on, it was simple to gallop the loveliest Mimi and the new Rodolfo through episodes neither Murger nor Puccini had ever considered.

Mimi and the new Rodolfo—as Jake left the Cherokee Terrace for a trolley car to town—had escaped from their garret and were dining in vulgar opulence at the Paris Crillon. Over the glasses briming with Château Yquem, his eyes with tenderness and flame caressed her. Jake gave the con-

ductor a nickel, and Mimi and Rodolfo from their balcony watched heaven die in the blood and blue of the Bay of Naples. Nightingales fluted in the darkness while the trolley banged through downtown traffic; then, though Jake was walking fast along streets loud and teeming, all sound stopped, all motion but the stars, only one voice sprayed the velvet dark like a heart-cry. . . . She was singing, singing to him, not the formal classics, but lullabies and love songs, the old, simple songs of lovers since love began . . . "Annie Laurie" . . . "Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes." . . . She sang until the moon washed the night and the sea, and then he went in to her where she played with the candlelight soft on her bent neck, and she looked up at him silent, waiting, but starbright . . . starbright. . . .

"Let's see 'em," snapped Packard. "Hell, is this all?"

It is difficult explaining why the lady one has just seduced in Naples has no time for one in Corinth, but Jake did his best and with dignity.

"She's meeting me this afternoon at the Fair Oaks Country Club. She'll pose for as long as I want."

"If she does, you're lucky. These sluts are all alike . . . why didn't you nail her when you had her? But go to it, go to it. . . ."

Jake stalked out boiling. An insensitive fool, Packard. In the end, nothing but an ignoramus.

One couldn't expect him to distinguish between a great lady and a lot of chippies. Or to comprehend that an appointment at Fair Oaks is a thing slightly different from reporters ringing doorbells. If Packard had been there, if he had heard her. . . . "And you'll come? . . . have things to ourselves . . . promise . . . ?" His chest expanded. Ah, well, let Packard have his little moments of high cockalorum, he simply didn't understand how these matters were arranged among civilized human beings.

Jake stopped long enough in the barber-shop to make a finicky toilette. His beard didn't need trimming, but he had Nat Sims prune the edges, anyway.

"Goin' to the grand uproar to-night?" said Nat.

"Oh, I may drop by," said Jake.

On the long ride to the club, which was on the north side of Corinth in the exclusive Fair Oaks section, Jake's spirits recovered. He forgot his wrath at Packard, life for no valid reason seethed with promise. He surveyed the local panorama, the evolution of ragtag tenements into cozy suburbs, and these into miles of lawns and driveways and homes whose white columns and tile roofs were almost lost among trees and shrubbery. Here dwelt society, but Jake's contemplation was without envy. In a sort of emotional quick-lunch, he chewed up this society and spat it out, and reached on to worthier repasts. Nice people beneath those lordly

roofs, no doubt, but essentially stupid. No contacts with the world of affairs. Smug in their tight little kingdom. While all the magic of living went on without them . . . New York . . . London . . . Great ships at sea . . . Europe whipped through his arteries in a throb, he was one with the geniuses of a continent, and patronized them. . . . And though it may be preposterous for a single meeting with a charming stranger to awake in youth a sense of participation in Broadway first nights, the Quartz' Arts Ball and racing week at Cowes, the fact remained that Jake approached the Fair Oaks Country Club in much the mood of an international playboy about to keep a public tryst with a notorious beauty and aware that the yokels will stare and whisper, but, there, let us indulge the dolts.

There was some difficulty at the entrance. A man in a sentry-box yelled at Jake strolling up the drive: "Heh—feller!"

He came out and demanded if Jake had a card, and when Jake retorted that he was with the *Courier* and had an appointment at the clubhouse, seemed dubious, and, after shaking his head and muttering, returned to his box and could be heard over a telephone asking for "Mister Hix."

Jake, hot, strode on. Silly to argue with these menials. They were always thick-headed and insulting. He ran up pretentious steps to a wide terrace and stopped as a colored doorman came out challengingly.

Jake stated his mission.

"Nothin' doin'," said the doorman. "Mistah Hix say no ree-potahs allowed."

"You black bastard!" exploded Jake. "Go in there and tell Mister Hix I'm here by special invitation of the guest of honor, and if you open your face to me again, I'll knock it off!"

The doorman retired, pouting but subdued.

Alone on the terrace, Jake waited. He waited furiously, striking with his stick at a dwarf evergreen in a tub. He waited a long time, while, beyond the screen doors, he could hear the murmur of music and of many people whom he imagined eating ices, and sitting under vivid umbrellas in the sunshine.

At last the screen doors banged again and he faced a woman. She was unknown to him, a young woman but a tall woman in very white elegance—at least, her dress and hat and her narrow pumps seemed very white, perhaps in contrast to her bare arms and to her face and neck, which were tanned a coppery gold, and to her hair, sleek and soot black. He thought, immediately, she is handsome, and that in the haughty lift of her head there was an effect as though she were ahorseback, charging and unafraid.

"You are the reporter?"

"No—ma'am. I'm Mr. Perry, staff artist of the *Courier*. I have an appointment," and he tossed at her the name of the loveliest Mimi.

"An artist?" The intonation was unimpeachable, but a flicker behind the sooty lashes made him warm to the toes. "I was not aware we had any artists in Corinth. In any event, we don't want the press. Tell your editor that. Colonel Main will understand. You said the *Courier*, didn't you?"

The godfather of Gerry Jericho controlled his temper.

Patiently he said, "But I have an appointment. I tell you, Madame asked me here. She wants me to make her picture."

"Please—I'm sure you don't wish to be annoying. The photographers were permitted to make pictures earlier. We can't have any of that now."

"But I'm not a photographer! I'm an artist. I want to *sketch* Madame. She promised to pose for me."

A thin line cut the coppery brow.

"I'm afraid you don't understand. This is a private affair, a gathering of ladies and gentlemen. It is not a street brawl or a prize fight. We don't —want—reporters! Possibly you are not a reporter, but it's the same thing!"

He could only glare at her stupidly, unable to believe that he had been so grossly insulted.

"Please go away," said the lady.

"I won't go away!" Starting near the pit of his stomach and pounding to the top of his skull, rage shook Jake. "My appointment here is with a *lady*. She made it. It's nobody's business but ours. Does

she know I'm here? I'll bet she don't! You go in there and tell her or—or—"

The alternative was baffling. He couldn't very well push past. If he had been insulted, he still hesitated to maul the insulter in this case, no matter how he itched to smack the smooth, scornful cheek. Even if he got by her, he would have to fight the doorman, gloating in the background.

He said, deliberately: "Who the hell are you?"

The lady made a shrug of disgust. She half turned to the doorman.

"Rucker, take this—fool!—in to Madame. You'll find her in the main hall, probably at the piano. . . . You understand, I am doing this simply because I don't want a scene!"

Jake marched in. He marched in and past her with the insolence of a victorious Goth, but under the spread-eagle, waves of mortification rose to drown him. Not merely did his every corpuscle shriek with little red devils of fury, but with vipers of shame. The woman had humiliated him and though he hated her—could have watched the lashes rip the tawny skin to tatters, and lustfully laid on —he admired her, too; admired her dark elegance, and envied her assurance, and in his heart truckled to the judgment which saw him as contemptible and which he could override only as the bull tramples the wounded but intrepid toreador.

A passage opened arrestingly on noise and brilliance, and the doorman, who had led the way in a

panic that each second would bring a concussion to his rear, stood aside.

"Dar she," he said, and pointed.

Across a congestion of heads and of hands in violent motion, Jake picked out at the end of the hall a figure electric even at that distance. She was standing by a piano, facing his way, and though it was too far to see, he knew the shadow under the big hat was aglow. Everyone was applauding, and it came to him with a shock what the thing was that had been plucking at his anger all along the corridor . . . "Annie Laurie. . . ."

The negro had left him to his own rashness, and he advanced with diffidence into a hum of "Divine!"s and "Isn't she adorable!"s, saying "Pardon" to recalcitrant backs, and nudging elbows, and conscious of his height and his uncontrollable stick and the probability that axle grease was smeared on the back of his pants. A suspicion that his handsome Cerberus had let him in knowing that he was headed for further embarrassment, caught him by the throat, but it was too late to back out. Thank God! he would reach her before she sat down to play something else.

She turned from her beseeching circle with a gasp of recognition.

That was his consolation. That and, for precious seconds, her touch on his sleeve and the two stars all his and the pretty apology—"But you see how it is? Such a shame you had all the trouble! Perhaps

to-morrow"—and consoling, too, the knowledge that for those seconds, at least, the whole of bonton Corinth was gaping at him in intimate colloquy with Fame, and no doubt wondering who was the distinguished looking man with the beard. But all quickly over. And the stares as he jostled his way out, no longer interested, but resentful, he thought, supercilious. Then the dread of reëncountering that woman. But she was not to be seen. Humiliating again—that she had not bothered to taunt him with a look. Only the doorman, probably wiggling fingers at his back. And the fellow at the gate. And the long ride back to town in the hot twilight, defeated. . . .

That night, as moonshine drenched the Paris attic where Rodolfo sang his passion and Mimi surrendered her cold little hands, Jake sat in anticipated glory with Beth at his side. His seeking hand found hers, and held it, hot and unresisting. The duet soared and swooned and soared again, the lovers lingered, loath to go—loath as the audience to have that crescendo of beauty torn from them. Jake thought: "It is perfect." He fought for his thrill. But it was not there—not in the pressure of Beth's fingers nor her breathing, sweet and quick in the darkness—not on the stage, though never was woman more adorable than this little milliner in her shawl and bonnet—not, either, in any visions of raptures in far arcadias. This emotion in his heart was real enough, convulsing enough, heaven

knew, but it was black, it was caustic, it was savage, it had to do with blood and lust and cruelty, and its motif was conquest, its quarry no society miss or pretty milliner or prima donna, but another image, arrogant and dauntless. Could he have willed it, the image would have been scorched forever from his mind, yet there she burned, hated and inextinguishable, challenging his vanity to subdue her.

After the first act they rose with eight thousand others and moved with what to-morrow's papers would call the "perfumed crush." Beth's clasp was tight on his arm, Beth's hair shimmered below his shoulder, his flowers were like an exquisite ticket she wore, gladly, to identify his property. She was lovely. He should have been proud of her, promenading with him past the boxes, nodding to her friends, introducing him to a jolly group in the foyer; drinking her soda-pop with merriment and dignity. And he was proud of her could he have knifed that fester in his soul—he was conscious of her daffodil charm, conscious, too, that she was proud of him and to-night, he thought, near the point where the sentinel had laid down his arms and he could take her were she "that kind of a girl."

Returning to their seats, they circled the opposite tier of boxes and Beth smiled and spoke many times.

"Who was that?" said Jake quickly. She looked back where the answering smile lingered over the orange fan.

"That? That's Santolina Marr—isn't she lovely? She was Santolina Chase till she married Dr. Marr. . . . He's the famous surgeon, you know."

He knew only that she was white and gold and black, that she was intrepidity astride, and that in the eyes that swept them was neither wonder nor scorn nor any telltale glint that she recognized Beth Wimbish's companion. Yet they had passed within a foot of her!

Thereafter, through opera and promenade, through song and orchestration and the hubbub of conversation, the unremarking eyes harried him, the smile cut at him like a saber, and the name was a gong inside his head . . . Santolina . . . Santolina. . . . A silly name, a bombastic, ugly name. But it dinned him to the last, it crashed into the finale, it pushed with him out through the crowds to the doors of the Wimbish limousine. . . . Santolina, Santolina. . . . He would have burnt it out, ground it under his heels, clenched it in his fist and strangled it. . . .

"Jiggs? . . . I loved it all so much. . . ."

He groped in the dark as the limousine, shaking free, raced for the long boulevard home. . . .

Santolina. . . . Mimi. . . . Sunset over Naples, over Fair Oaks, thickening to bloody twilight. And the nightingale's throat intrepid but quivering under the stars. . . .

"Jiggs—honey. You hurt. . . ."

Hurt? And why not? With the perfume fouling

his lungs, choking him yet choking out all other senses but the sense of power. Thus—to crush her in his arms.

His own gasp brought him realization. Beth was crying, not a little from pain. But she did not thrust him off; her sweetness twined. . . .

"Jiggs—darling!"

God in heaven! What was he doing? This was no Mimi, no Effie, nor glorious sinner; this was little Beth Wimbish, virginal, patrician, private property and no trespassing without a license—this, by Cæsar, was marriage if it was anything! So be it then—sunk in chagrin, he held her chastely while he kissed her.

V

Old Man Wimbish—so his city tabbed at fifty a grizzled mastiff who had won his marrowbones from the pack—Old Man Wimbish sat in his scuppernong arbor, waving vigorously a palmleaf fan. His face was dewy but contented, for if it was warm it was likewise Sunday and Old Man Wimbish's hour for retiring to his kennel and meditating on the loot he had buried around town in the shape of farm acreage, negro tenements, first mortgages and a profitable office building or two. He was worth, said Corinth, a cool million, an estimate rather short of the truth—and the old skinflint wouldn't even buy a necktie!

It was undeniable that neither scarf nor collar bound his thorny neck at the moment and that tomorrow the black string bow would observe the fifth anniversary of its tenancy. Undeniable, too, that the fan bore the imprint of the First Presbyterian Church, and that Old Man Wimbish, a devout attendant, had snitched it as he snitched his writing paper. (Having traveled much, Old Man Wimbish could and did conduct his correspondence

on the stationery of half a hundred hotels.) Corinth told stories about Old Man Wimbish: that he never tipped; that he personally gathered eggs from his farm for a larder extravagantly stocked in other respects; that, at a directors' meeting in his library, Old Man Wimbish turned out the lights as an economy measure, being discovered later, in the spurt of a smoker's match, sitting in his underdrawers to save wear on his pants.

Yet one may doubt, even accepting such tosh, that Old Man Wimbish was really stingy. Rather were his eccentricities a hangover from his barebitten youth and a sort of rebellion against these effete times. He seized the chance for a haul on swell stationery just as once he gobbled up fat pastureland, and he wore the same tie year in and year out for the same sentimental reason that he perspired in a grape arbor instead of lolling before an electric fan in his mansion up the hill.

Certainly, whatever envious townsfolk might say about Old Man Wimbish as a citizen, they could not criticize him as a parent. Back in the days of his first success, when a tardy god had placed in his arms the mite of flesh which Old Man Wimbish felt was his fruit of strife as rightfully as the hardier treasures he had wrung from fate, his heart had found its one weakness. His only child was his only dissipation, on her he lavished the kindness he grudged the world. He knew her better than he knew anyone; he believed he knew her better than anyone

did. Others might have her radiance and her laughter, but Old Man Wimbish had had her tears. When she was four, he had come upon her, tugging desperately at a book wedged in a high niche. When he stepped in and got it for her quickly, she began to cry and not until he had put it back and she had managed the descent herself, was she consoled. Her father's child—under the sunshine that lode of silent grit—and in the easier years, whether it was escape from trouble or a lighter wish he sensed in the spirit so like his, he yearned to step in and get it for her quickly.

Now, as he saw her come running down the path among the rosebushes, he knew at once that some desire sped her, and he chuckled, aware that he would grant it—only first she must scratch the back of his head and call him "Red." Time long ago had blanched the reason for that nickname of his boyhood, yet its discovery years later by his daughter, and her gleeful use of it, never failed to make the grizzled mastiff wag his tail.

"You bad boy!" She panted over him, hands behind her, gaze caressingly reproachful. "Sneakin' off back of the house just when I wanted to talk to you—why'n't you come up where it's nice and cool?—Old Meanness!"

"I like it here."

Though he spoke gruffly, his eyes were twinkling slits.

"Humph! Grumph! You don't so, either. You

don't like it atall! You do it just to rile me. You do it just because you know I *hate* this old scuppernong arbor, and you come here, and sit just to *spite* me."

Twinkling slits puckered even tighter. Her eyes danced.

"I like it," repeated Old Man Wimbish.

He might have been thinking, for the words were reminiscent if not the tone, how like her mother she was. But, adoring each ripe curve under the smart little suit, he thought only that she was the cutest trick he had ever seen—Mrs. Wimbish, at last recollection, was spindling and whiney; worked to a bag of bones, she often said.

He settled deeper, the waving fan a defiance.

Beth straddled his knee.

"Aw, come on, Red!" She roughed his hair.

Old Man Wimbish made a grunting noise.

"Who's up at the house?" he demanded.

"Nobody!—Honest, there's not a soul. And it's much, *much* cooler there." She swung a silky, artless ankle. "Jiggs Perry might come by later—maybe."

Far back of Old Man Wimbish's twinkles, two cautious flares sparked.

"That the newspaper feller?"

"Uh, huh. You know—draws those funny pictures in the *Courier*."

"Yeh—I remember. . . . Whiskers. . . . Goofy kind of feller, ain't he?"

"Jiggs?—No!—He—he's awful sweet. He likes you, too!"

"Never would have suspected him of it. Seemed to me he was always too busy listenin' to himself tick."

Beth roughed his hair again.

"You'll like him when you get to know him."

Old Man Wimbish pondered the unequivocal form of this prediction. He snuffed as a mule might that scents a hole in the dark.

"What's he comin' round for?" he ventured warily.

"Why, to see me—funny! But he does like you. He said so, he said he thought you were a fine man. Aw—Red—be a sweet sugar-pie!"

At this second use of his nickname, the light faded from Old Man Wimbish's eyes, as though, far down in him, a hand had turned a warning switch. And so it had—a cold hand twisting in his heart. He had felt the hand before, but never so cold, never so strong.

"Honey?"

"Yes—Red."

Her hair nuzzled his face.

"This feller—you like him?"

Beth looked up.

"Yes," she said, and her eyes were unwavering, unsmiling.

Old Man Wimbish wished he had not asked her. He wished he had dropped the subject of this feller

quick. He wished he had gotten up and gone straight in the house when she came out there. He could have fiddled around, dodged her. Yet he knew it would have been no use. She liked this feller. This goofy feller who made a living drawing pictures. This feller with the whiskers. This Perry. . . . Sudden panic assailed him, his knees twitched. But it was too late.

"I want to marry him," said Beth.

So had she said it, clear and low, that midnight a week ago. Then there had been none to hear but the girl in the mirror—the strange girl who gazed bewitched at the torn flowers, the hair all crumpled and the hot eyes. The girl had been kissed by boys, and kissed boys, but never one with the boy's lure and the man's grasp of this one. She had liked him because he was big and uneasy and bluntly different from other boys, and because behind his awkwardness was a strength, and a mystery phosphorescent with promise. So many Corinth boys were sweet and jolly and fun to play with, and that was all. Boys she had known all her life. They were still children, and she was no longer a child. This boy she could play with and mother like the rest, but he drew her with something else, a force that moved under his smile like an undertow beneath bright water. His eyes had been a hedge between her and another land, and that night she had pierced the covert, and out of it had leaped the wood-god.

The mastiff's child spoke again.

"I want him, Red," she said.

Old Man Wimbish had supposed some day it would come—out of all those fellers constantly hanging around, occupying his porch and his chairs and his automobile, taking her away from him nights and Sundays, courteously brushing him aside, eating his food since Beth was six and even, of late years, drinking his charcoal-keg corn. It was bound to come out of one of them, and to tell the truth, Old Man Wimbish didn't much care which it was, they were all a passel of shiftless minners, none of 'em good enough to shine her shoes, and while whiskers was kind of pilin' it on, still the tragedy was not this feller or that, but the unsmiling glow in Beth's face and the knowledge that he must surrender to it. She must have her man, and the hand in Old Man Wimbish's heart would be cold and twisting forever.

So he repeated, "Marry him, honey?" and but feebly tried to scrabble together the don'ts and warnings of the already defeated.

"Yes, daddy—he's coming this afternoon to ask you."

At that, he looked at her almost piteously. Face this young sprout—ask him questions—judge the altogether repulsive?

Beth jumped down and blew a baby's kiss in his neck.

"Of course, it was all settled days ago before you knew a thing about it, Old Blessums! And you

don't have to do a thing but be nice, like you can when you want to, and tell Jiggs he's the luckiest lamb alive. Who wouldn't be with a sweet puddin' like you for a father-in-law? He *is* a lamb, daddy!"

"But—"

A host of unknowables, unsayables, hammered at Old Man Wimbish's mouth.

"*I* know. You want to know how much he makes, and what his prospects are, and if he's got a past, and—and all that mush. You can do all that later, Daddy. But now I want to be happy!—Aw, come on, Red, don't you want me to be happy?"

Old Man Wimbish got up. He hitched his suspenders over his shoulders. . . . So Jake, approaching the Wimbish home at a dogged clip, wondering why the devil he did propose after that night, assuring himself in the next breath that she was the finest girl alive, rationalizing his emotions to the point where, with his egopersuasive temperament, they were equivalent to love, and in all his ferment pleasantly conscious that Beth was a society girl and had a rich papa—"but if the old dodo gets nasty, I'll walk out on them, and just as well, too"—Jake, hazarding the Wimbish stoop, was met by a growl unmistakably intended to be amiable.

The interview was short and mutually painful.

"You'll forgive me, sir, for loving your daughter."

"I'd mistrust the man who didn't. And if I can

get used to the notion, I'll forgive you for marryin' her. If she can stand it, I reckon I can."

"It's what she wants," went on Old Man Wimbish, soberly. "Beth's had a heap of beaux, but she never set up serious to one before. It's what she wants. I dunno much about you newspaper fellers—your kind of business ain't my kind of business, and I never much believed what I saw in the papers. But Beth says you're different from the rest of 'em. Mebbe so. . . . Hope so, anyway. If anything ever happened to Beth—"

The mastiff's eyes, though far away, were steely blue. Jake hastened reassurance.

"I'll always be good to her, sir."

Old Man Wimbish made his grunting noise. It might have been belief, and it might have been something else.

He said no more, but shook hands hornily and waddled off to the scuppernong arbor, where he retrieved the palmleaf fan and unhooked his suspenders. It was cool up at the house, as Beth said, but it was quiet here in the shade, and it was all his. He would not be interrupted again.

Jake kissed the palm of Beth's hand for the twentieth time.

"And when we're married," she said, "you'll work and work and become a famous artist."

"I've been thinking about that," he told her. "You know—I don't believe there's any future for me on the *Courier*. I've got a scheme."

"Darling!"

He grinned at her. This headlong devotion was adorable. He was still dazed by it.

"Martin Starr got hold of me yesterday. He's thinking of starting his own business, and, between us, he wants me to come in with him. What do you think? Advertising and publicity, you know—he believes I've the makings of a business man as well as an artist."

"Honey," said Beth, "you could be anything you wanted to be."

She hesitated, the woman practical even in love.

"Don't you think, Jiggs, if you did that, it might be better if you didn't have a beard? Oh, I love you in it, but—well, business men are so funny in Corinth. I'm sure father would advise it."

Jake regarded her thoughtfully and without pique.

"You may be right," he said.

She patted the beard. "It's a nice, tickly old brush, and I'll miss it." The next moment she was in his arms. "Oh, Jiggs, darling, you will always love me, won't you? It's for keeps, isn't it?" She looked up at him, this man of whom she knew only that she loved him, and he looked down at her, touched and for an instant daunted.

"Of course, Beth."

The mastiff's child sighed, cuddling against him.

"With me," she whispered, "it's for keeps."

They were married in September at the First Presbyterian Church. The six bridesmaids were from the best families in Corinth. Martin Starr was best man. Colonel Main, Packard and Harrison Traylor represented the press, and Cherie Cherokee wrote forgivingly of the ceremony and the reception afterward at the West Lake Country Club.

The groom, clean shaven, wore the conventional black, and if any glances from the congregation were supercilious, the fact missed him. Even God, who had observed him once on the roof of a box car, relented—not a pin-prick of ancient envy disturbed Jake as the organ played Puccini.

Some of the newspaper boys had planned to tie a sign to the bridal car, but refrained on Shag Kenny's advice. "I saw Jake for a minute this afternoon," he said, "and I got an idea our little remembrances won't be missed. Instead," he added, "let's go over to the Press Club and turn down an empty spittoon."

Old Man Wimbish sat in a front pew and, for the first time in memory, wore a white tie and departed without a fan.

PART TWO

VI

In the offices of Starr & Perry, Publicity Counselors, Mr. Vitus Blacksong sponged with his third fresh handkerchief the moisture induced by the hot day, his corpulency and his anxiety to impress on his two auditors the desperate nature of the straits from which they were to rescue him. Mr. Blacksong's lilac silk shirt was a dark purple in spots, his white linen suit, so crisp that morning, stuck to his fat wrists, but these discomforts he would remedy shortly by a shower and a complete change in his air-cooled gym on top of the Blacksong Theater Building. Thus, by the summer of 1916, had the movie industry enslaved even the weather to a gentleman who ten years before had barked for the Dog Faced Boy and now controlled the picture houses in thirty-three cities south of the Potomac.

"You know, boys, I'm a rich man, but I can't tote this load alone, it's too big for any one citizen," declaimed Mr. Blacksong. "Here these good ladies come to me and they practically put it up to me to save the name of Corinth. They say to me, 'Mr. Blacksong, it'll be a shame and a disgrace if Cor-

inth don't have the veterans. Atlanta's had 'em, Chattanooga's had 'em, Dallas has had 'em six times and New Orleans God knows how many. Corinth'—they say to me—'Corinth ain't had 'em in twenty years, and if Corinth don't have 'em this year, it'll be a crying scandal. We've got to take 'em, we *ought* to take 'em! and you're the one man who can put it over!'—That's what they say to me, gentlemen, and I'll be doggoned if I can see any way to get out of it. Not that I want to get out of it!" Mr. Blacksong raised a humid palm. "It's a mean job, 'specially right now with my business growing so fast I can't see straight, but as I see it, it's my patriotic duty as a citizen to put this thing over, it's the patriotic duty of every citizen in this town to help me, 'specially the rich ones—it's the patriotic duty of you boys to help me!"

Messrs. Starr and Perry, fully aware of Mr. Blacksong's inward gloating over the honor paid the ex-chanter of dog faced boys by Corinth womanhood, gazed back at him earnestly. Each assumed his conception of the patriotic mask; both wondered when Mr. Blacksong would get around to the point—money.

"That's what we're here for, sir," assured Martin Starr—"to help you. Just what do you want us to do?"

"Well, sir"—Mr. Blacksong sponged himself again—"you know how it is. This town is the best town on earth—there ain't a finer, generouser peo-

ple anywhere—but it's been conventioned to death. We've had so durn many conventions that folks are sick of 'em. Take this year. The Shriners and the Rotarians and the Woodmen of the World and the Baptist preachers and the Eastern Star and God knows what all! Now the merchants are saying conventions don't help business, they got all the business they want. They're making more money than they ever made in their lives, but they're scairt, they're afraid it won't last, and I don't much blame 'em. Here's this Presidential election coming along, and maybe Wilson won't beat Hughes even if he did keep us out of war, and if the Republicans get in, most anything might happen with Roosevelt hollering bloody murder and everything. We went and invited the veterans last year, but now the merchants are claiming we ought to withdraw the invite, that the veterans ought not to meet again till the war's over, that their convention costs too much account of them being a lot of old men and mostly busted, and their folks don't spend nothing, and we got to put 'em up in hotels except those who insist on camping out like they did in sixty-five, and probably they'll die of pneumonia on our hands, and—well, all that don't matter, gentlemen, the fact is this town can't afford to insult the Confederate Veterans, this town's got to raise a hundred thousand dollars to entertain that convention, and you boys have got to bullyrag 'em into doing it!"

Messrs. Starr and Perry examined the floor.

"Of course," said Jake, "we can do it. You know what we did for the opera guarantee last spring. And for the City Hospital."

"But," said Martin Starr, "it costs money to raise money, Mr. Blacksong. You know that."

Mr. Blacksong sighed.

"I'll bank the game—we have to hire offices and pay stenographers—I know that. What I'm hoping is that the patriotic citizens of this town, outside of the hired help, will donate their services to the cause. I was hoping, frankly, you boys would donate your services."

Messrs. Starr and Perry exchanged glances. Mr. Starr's glance seemed to say: "This is your cue."

Jake might have been dictating a form letter. "Mr. Blacksong, our business is to raise money. We have other business, advertising and publicity of all kinds, but raising money is our business as much as theaters are yours. I honor the Confederate Veteran. My father lost an arm at Seven Pines. But, if we make an exception in one case, we can't draw the line anywhere. A campaign as important as this will demand all the resources of our organization for weeks. If I came to you, Mr. Blacksong, and asked you to give the receipts of your theaters to charity for six weeks, would you consider me a fair man?"

The policy of the Blacksong theaters in the matter of benefits was notorious. Starr cut in quickly:

"Of course, Starr & Perry will be glad to subscribe to the fund no matter who handles the publicity."

Mr. Blacksong, who had purpled for a moment, rose damply. "You win, boys. Write your own ticket—dope it out—what it will take—all the details—and come to see me to-morrow. I know you boys can put it over. I haven't forgotten what you did for 'The Birth of a Nation.' "

Messrs. Starr and Perry solemnly winked at one another when Mr. Blacksong had gone.

"Marty," said Jake, "we're smart little boys. This is our meat."

"You said it," said Starr. "I'll put young Rumpert on the job. He can see the Daughters this afternoon and get all the dope. We'll be all set to shoot Vitus in the breadbasket by noon to-morrow. Unless I'm dead wrong, there's a couple of thousand in it for each of us."

They were in Jake's office, a pleasant room with a blue Chinese rug, pictures and roses in a blue vase softening the harsh greeting of steel and mahogany. Jake teetered back under the caricature of himself by Caruso.

"Check!" he said. "And Rumpert's salary and other pickings till the convention's over. . . . Will you ask Miss Fane to come in on your way out, Marty? I've a few things to do, then I'm off."

"Check!" said Marty, and went out.

Jake turned to the papers before him, but first he took a cigar from a box in his desk, and cut the

end with a gold clipper. It was a Corona Corona. He thought: "Two thousand bucks." That was good—he needed the money. He made a lot, but always he needed the money. For his tailor, for the man who made his shirts, for his car, for his club bills, for the thousand things life in Corinth demanded of a man in his position. He needed the money for household and department store bills, too, but not so badly—Beth could always touch the old man if her end of things rubbed. Some day they would come into real dough. Meantime—why worry? Life was too short, and too amusing.

Miss Fane came in and closed the door and looked at him. She saw, above the desk, his torso and his bent head not as sections of a muscular young man in a blue suit, but as the bust of a bull, a beautiful, golden bull with the power to gallop her away into a labyrinth and there devour her to her last ecstatic blood drop. He moved, and in the sunshine she saw all the hairs of his short mustache glitter golden.

"Did you want me, Mr. Perry?" she said.

"Yes, dear." He did not look up. "Yes . . . Take a letter." He dictated as men do who know by experience they may commit to their secretaries everything from their honor to their syntax. That is, he told Miss Fane things and she made a few swirls which to-morrow would return to him, like clothes from a laundry, beautifully done no matter how crumpled they went in. Thus, "B-B" on Miss

Fane's pad, would freshen into an excellent circular letter in behalf of the Big Brother Movement, "Pickford Sundays" would iron out into paragraphs extolling next week's movie at the Alcazar, "Dimples-12-Rip" would pay Mr. Perry's golf bet to Mr. Joseph Meade Ripley, and those hieroglyphs at the bottom would break a dentist's appointment, call off a club foursome, fetch a bootlegger, pack a bag, disappoint Mrs. Perry's dinner guests and, Miss Fane suspected, enrich the hours of a lady other than Mrs. Perry or herself. Yet, so perfect a secretary was Miss Fane, her pencil did not falter as it jotted: "Phone Blossom Inn—arrive dinner—2—Saturday."

She sat with her knees crossed, her eyes on the pad and her fingers nerveless, waiting, and though Jake was pleasantly appreciative of the sheen of her stockings, her brown hands and the curled tip of her nose under the soft hair, these allures reached him through the mesh of his own thoughts and by a process of transference merged into the flesh of all women. So he said, "That's all, dear," and got up and, putting his arm around her, caressed her smoothly, thinking of the week-end. A sweet girl, Miss Fane, a wonderful secretary . . . in love with him, but that didn't spoil her efficiency and was comforting on sour days. . . . He wouldn't have a secretary who wasn't in love with him. Only, if you go too far, you have to fire them—

"Good night, dear," he conceded.

She suffered his kiss tensely.

The drive home out Corinth's well paved boulevards was always gratifying to Jake, and particularly gratifying when he could marshal above the wheel the phantasms of the things he was going to do rather than the ghosts of the things he had not done. To-night, with another two thousand dollars practically in the bank and Julie Messenger practically in the bed, he could paint frescoes on the hedges of West Lake Drive all the way to his wife's arms. They were not more ordered than the frescoes that are said to flash before the eyes of drowning men, but whereas a drowning man is at the mercy of any dusty cubbyhole of memory and must observe the mole on Aunt Martha's nose in importance equal to the first night of his honeymoon, Jake maintained control merely sufficient to exclude all but the pleasanter moments.

In Eureka, no doubt, the soda still cankered Fortitude Perry's biscuits and the husks reeked from the sow's pen where Christian Perry implacably mourned his son. Rain steamed the turpentine belt and froze hoboes hungry on the New Orleans levees. In Corinth police station, niggers daubed razor cuts. In the *Courier* office, artists damned deadlines. Joe Armondale, Shag Kenny, and Pete Braden sat around a quart of moonshine in the Press Club, singing "You're a gang of muckers all, damn your eyes!" Somewhere an arrogant lady insulted interlopers. But on the West Lake Road

in this prosperous year of 1916, only bright phantoms danced. They were phantoms of shirts and roadsters and luxurious interiors of homes, of fat advertising accounts and servants with highballs and one's first name shouted at luncheons for bankers, they were phantoms of music, of pretty women, they were phantoms of all that can fill life for a man of substance in Corinth, and that, where a man is young and not easily moved by loyalty to the old days or by obligations toward any referee but his own interest, may be considerable.

Jake, swinging the car up the short drive to the covered parkway on the side of the bungalow, climbed out in one of those moods of contentment which touch us usually just before or after the perfect dinner. There had been nights when he munched the crusts of struggle and wounded vanity, when he would lock the door of his little room and not emerge until hours after Beth was asleep. But to-night the world was on his platter; he could scent its savors and anticipate its juices.

He plunged around front where the chorus of hails had met him as he drove up.

Jim and Julie Messenger, in golf togs, sat in the swing at the end of the veranda. Kay Drayton sprawled her thin legs from the wicker chair she invariably took because its arms assured the least effort in smoking and drinking. Dickie Cheney perched on the rail near Beth, in another chair. They all held highballs.

"Heh, Jakey!" said the men. " 'lo, Jiggs darling," drawled Kay Drayton. Julie Messenger smiled. "Hi, honey," said Beth.

Jake went from person to person. Though he knew each of them intimately and within the last forty-eight hours had seen them all, he obeyed some atavistic impulse from marquis or peasant that always compelled him on entering a room of people to behave ceremoniously. The ladies' hands he kissed. Thereby, since not the oldest Colonel in Corinth still observed that custom, he dumped his confusion on the ladies. Beth, he kissed last; cheek, hand; it was, she sometimes thought, his sweetest and most irritating gesture.

"Jakey have drink?" he asked her.

"Sure, honey—sit down here and I'll call Maybelle."

Jake took the footstool where he could lean against Beth's knee and command a view of Kay's legs, Julie's eyes and the sunset trailing hazy gold across the fairways of the country club. The conversation went on, flowing over him like tranquil water, and he let himself sink deep into the channel of his own thoughts, to lie back with Beth's finger tips rumpling his hair, the drink cold in his throat and lazy adulteries telegraphed to Julie through half shut lids.

He liked these people, he supposed, as well as he liked anyone in the world, they were well to do,

they were young, they liked him, and each, after his fashion, was amusing or charming. But as a group they bored him. If the fault was his—an incapacity for small talk, a sort of brutishness that dumbed him in the buzz of mere gossip—the fact remained that while he could discuss her soul with Kay endlessly, or with Dickie Cheney talk for hours about golf or books, both of them became extremely dull to him when he was a simple listener in the circle.

What did he care what Jim Messenger told the board of governors after the last dance? Kay's legs were like pencils of spun molasses candy. He would have liked to run his hand slowly from her knee to her instep along the silky ribs. Women should always wear silk stockings, even in bed. There should be a law. Perhaps if he took it up with the board of governors. He grinned, watching two golf players until they turned to midgets on the rim of the lake. The lake was on fire for a little, then twilight walked out and ate the golf course in a gulp. In the shadows the Confederate veterans marched, shadowy old men with waving shadows of beards. They marched around, around, bringing him ducats. Next week he should have to work. He tipped his glass, the heeltap dribbled pleasantly to his stomach, and he patted Beth's hand, thinking how it would be that night on the tenth tee with Julie in his arms.

"I'm not putting it on moral grounds at all," said Jim Messenger. "I don't give a damn for people's morals or their lack of them if they'll only observe the rules of decency. And discretion is the first rule of decency. What I say is the club can't afford . . ."

What an ass Jim Messenger was! What did he know about other people's morals? Or the rules of decency? I suppose if you got up now and said, "By the way, Jim, old man, I'm taking your wife away for the week-end, but I assure you it won't go beyond our little group," he would reply, "Why, that's hunkydory, Jake, only please be discreet about it." Yes, he would, he would try to kill you. That was the trouble with Corinth, playing at decency and raising hell on the side and outraged if somebody did a little open, honest fornicating.

Jake sat up, suddenly angry.

"What's all this about?"

"Oh, nothing, Jiggs," Beth smoothed his cheek. "All that mess last week about those young girls spooning out in the cars during the dance."

"Well, it was disgraceful," said Kay Drayton. "They were mere children. I agree with Jim—it ought to be stopped."

Her gaze crossed Dick Cheney's without a flicker.

Julie yawned and said she thought so, too.

Jim said by Jove, it would be if he had anything to do with it.

"You fool," thought Jake, "your wife was one of them," but he leaned back with a grunt. No use getting shot to show an ass his ears. They were all a little asinine, for that matter.

"Well, let's amble, Julie," said Jim. "I've got to telephone my aunt."

"Do it off the end of the porch," said Jake. "We're not too damned discreet here."

"Jake!"

Beth rapped him as she might have a small boy. The rest sat silent and uncomfortable until Dick Cheney snickered and Kay got up.

"I'm going, too—after that one. Jiggs, you're impossible!"

She flicked him with her hand as she passed, in token of her forgiveness.

When they had all gone, and Beth, too, inside, he sat spraddle-legged in the dark and regretted. Not because of Jim Messenger—do the fool good. Or Kay, who always forgave him. Or Julie, who was crazy about him. Or Dickie, who liked Jim Messenger as little as he did. But it was a low trick on Beth. She wouldn't say anything, but she would be sore and he hated for her to be sore. It made things uncomfortable around the house.

Hell, what right had she to be sore? Civilized adults admitted the facts of life, and the natural functions were facts as inescapable as eating. It would have served her right if he'd set Jim Messenger the example in front of all of them. . . .

Incensed by his own sophistry, he glared at the golf course, and now it was gaunt trees and darkness, and the lake sobbing disagreeably. . . . And Beth had gone in without a word. All right, by god! two could play at that game. . . .

She heard the door of his room slam, and she sighed, for she knew as well as though she had sat inside his brain exactly what transpired there. She sighed, looking into her mirror, seeing not herself but the closed door.

It didn't anger her. It had never angered her those times when he came home glum and after dinner closed the door and far into the night she could hear him muttering to himself when he thought she was asleep. She was only distressed for him. . . . He was so funny. He had demanded a room of his own, like a little boy, and she had entered with him into elaborate schemes, exactly where he wanted this and the law that the maid must touch nothing. Afterward, like a little boy, he lost interest in the room and the maid kept it tidy like the rest of the house . . . except at those times. They had begun, she vividly remembered, about a year after they were married, and at first she had not understood, she was hurt and aloof, until she discovered his secret. The tubes of paint and the canvas under the bed. Like a little boy, to think they were perfectly hidden. . . . Even then, she had not fully understood. Jiggs was painting and ashamed to confess it. People would laugh because

the business man had gone arty. She had smiled, and said nothing, and loved him the more because, some day, he would be a great painter. But the paintings did not grow; the brushes, she saw, collected dust; once, after a long black night, she found a strange daub. He must have flung the paint literally by spadefuls. . . . Then she had begun to doubt the artist motive; then she had sensed the truer bite, sheer discontent.

She had been dreadfully sorry for him, dreadfully unhappy. For, from the beginning, she had set out to be happy and to make him happy. She had decided that marriage must be worked at to be successful, and she had worked at marriage. She had worked at it as her father might have worked at collecting a debt, only she had worked lovingly. . . . It hadn't been hard, most of the time. Jake was pretty sweet, most of the time. He was sweet in unexpected ways. He brought her unexpected things at unexpected moments. Once he brought her a bull pup that turned out eventually to be a sort of hound; a negro had offered it on the street and Jake gave him ten dollars. Often he brought flowers. From a trip to Havana he brought her a Spanish shawl, six parrakeets and enough gaudy jewelry to delight a harem. He never remembered anniversaries. . . . She liked that, his not remembering things. It gave her a sweet power over him. She had to keep at him about brushing his teeth and eating green vegetables. She drilled him to be neat

about his person and not too flamboyant. And because he took her gentle nagging humbly, like a little boy, and seemed to like being bossed in domestic matters, she let other matters go. She would not, she told herself, be a nagging wife about everything. She must not make him unhappy. If he was unhappy, it was terrible, it was her fault, she had failed. . . . So, when he got drunk, she didn't reproach him, even when he misbehaved badly before other people and called tyrannical old Mrs. Pelham Rain-in-the-Face. So she showed no jealousy when he danced too long with very certain girls, and her questions were considerate nights he was late or had to be away. She tried not to mind, really, those times when he was not drunk yet misbehaved, apparently, out of uncontrollable perversity. A blind flareup against the nearest mark. A pointless fury akin, she guessed, to the urge behind his painting. As when, during a protracted home bridge, he had suddenly stalked in nude to the waist and asked what the bid was. Two ladies had stopped speaking to the Perrys after that, but Beth had kept her temper until, next day, she could laugh.

She supposed, sighing, it was silly to show even cold disapproval. Silly to disapprove the little boy vulgarity on the porch. Silly because she had known when she walked in the house how it would be, and that was the way it always was—never a real row, a silly pouting over a silly little thing. Perhaps, if she were only made different, a real row would help.

But she wasn't made different, she could fuss about spinach, and after one of his clownish exhibitions she could freeze, but she could not speak about the big things shut in her heart, those she must hide there, coiled, gnawing. . . .

Beth got up from the dressing table.

She went to the closed door. She tapped.

"Jiggs?"

No answer.

"You're not mad at me, are you? Say—honey?"

She waited. A chair scraped. She heard the latch turn slowly.

He stood in the door and looked at her. His head was bent and she was reminded of a pet dog after a switching.

"Aw—lamb pie! Don't be mean. . . ."

Suddenly he grinned and put his arms around her, patting her shoulder. He had felt her forgiveness—magnanimously he forgave.

"Nice Beth! . . . Bethie love Jakey? . . . Give kiss? . . ."

She raised her head and kissed him. Humiliation can become noble when one loves. . . .

At dinner, he told her enthusiastically about the Confederate veterans. It would mean a big commission. They could get the new roadster, after all.

A shame, said Jake, that he might have to go out of town Saturday, or they would pick it out then.

Beth suffered a sharp stab. She could not help

remembering what Jim Messenger had said about being a bachelor over the week-end.

But she forced a smile.

"That's all right, honey. I know you've got to work hard . . . poor little boy. . . ."

VII

WHIPPING UP THE INTEREST OF A WAR-SCARED public in the tatters of an ancient quarrel, is dreary work. So Messrs. Starr and Perry soon discovered. Along the Somme, men were dying frightfully and by hosts for yards of trench. Before Verdun the German waves advanced endlessly to crucifixion. The big guns shook from Gallipoli to Jutland. *Shrecklichkeit* rained from the air, and horror struck from the sea. Who cared that Pickett charged at Gettysburg, or remembered there was once a bonny blue flag?

"By the lord, if this Mexican trouble comes to a head, we can kiss our money good-bye," said Martin Starr. "There'll be no reunion if we have to fight Villa and Carranza—and maybe the Huns to boot."

"I almost wish we would," said Jake. "I'm getting hoarse from giving the rebel yell at luncheons. . . . Did you see where the Zeps made another night raid on London? The British got one with anti-aircraft guns."

For two weeks Starr and Perry had been hard

at it, and a vast ennui was lapping Jake. You read histories of old battles and reports of forgotten bivouacs, you inspired columns about thin gray lines, you spoke and you wrote speeches for others to speak before Rotarians and club women and school children, about thin gray lines, you took pictures at the Old Soldiers' Home, you organized committees, you spurred the workers, you dictated pep letters to the lukewarm and soft soap to fussy old generals, and you never failed to mention the thin gray line in any of them. . . . And then you got down to brass tacks in rooms heavy with cigar smoke, until some patriot irritably agreed to go out and badger the railroads or the merchants for another ten thousand. Afterward you grabbed an extra . . . Hill 304 again faced the German assault. The big guns crashed. The dead men lay in banks. . . . War swallowed the mind in one grisly, glorious smack. What price thin gray lines?

Nor was Jake's temper in the wrangles of an unpopular campaign helped by developments in another direction. Julie devoured and infuriated him. Here was his toy, yet he could not play with it.

She was tantalizing. After the first conquest there should have been nothing arduous in sustaining one of those pleasant intrigues not uncommon among Corinth's wilder young marrieds. Places existed for that sort of thing. Opportunities waited only on a few easy lies and simple caution. This was not the first affair Jake had successfully ma-

nipulated until the inevitable satiation. But Julie shied and fended though she was past regret committed to the game.

They went to Blossom Inn. The place was sixty miles from Corinth at a sleepy springs, and the road to it led through deep summer. Passion jogged out of the country lanes on a curbed horse, and they were Chloe and Daphnis lost in the golden weather.

In the last mile a car overtook them and though it passed in a flash, Julie was panic-stricken. She was sure she knew the driver.

"It was that Doane man in the bank, Jiggs—I know it was!"

"Rot!—You couldn't have recognized a speeder like that if it had been Jim himself."

But a block from the public square she made him get out and go ahead alone to reconnoiter. A car stood outside the Inn. Jake went in and looked at the last signature on the book. It was Doane's. . . .

"We'll go on to Peachburg," he argued. "We can make it easy before night and in a town that big we'll be perfectly safe."

"But he recognized us, I'm sure he did. I recognized him!"

"Don't be silly, Julie. The man had to have his eyes on the road when he passed us."

"Jiggs, you've got to take me back. . . ."

She moved in the seat, the barest flinch from his shoulder, but he caught the gesture and behind it the rush of fear that had turned appetite into dis-

taste and what was glamorous and flaming a little ago into bickering over a cold potato. His eyes smoldered at the leafy street, the bright square lifeless as a deserted garden, and beyond in a clump of trees the hotel where, he knew, a room with old-fashioned tidies and a four-poster bed looked out on a porch over a creek and a falls that splashed when it was dark.

In the square a shaft glistened—the inevitable Confederate monument. Jake swore and put in the clutch. . . .

"All right, Priscilla, we'll go home to papa. I suppose if he found you'd been riding with me, he'd spank."

"No—Jake, my dear—he'd kill us both."

"He would be that kind of a fool."

"Shut up about Jim," said Julie.

They quarreled for twenty miles and then ran into rain. The road promptly became a red paste. Out of Boonetown Jake skidded into a cornfield. An hour's tramping and a farmer's horses freed the car, but it was after midnight when they bumped into Corinth on the rims. Jake suggested that it was too late to go home. Julie replied that she would go to a girl friend's. He left her there without argument. "Good night," said Julie, "Call me up."—"Maybe," said Jake. "I don't struggle for my women."

But he did—for this one. If she had not been as unscrupulous about disappointing him as she was

about deceiving her husband, he would have tired of her after the third meeting, for he recognized that for all her smart veneer she was fundamentally the same lascivious little animal that Effie was. She had more cunning, however, and she sinned in mortal terror of Jim Messenger no matter how completely she tricked him. Her desire was subject always to her caution, a fact which frequently balked Jake, aggravated his own urge and incensed him, whom most proprieties incensed.

Had he his way, the fellow was quoted by his friends, the good people of Corinth would go about as naked and happy as dogs, coupling on whim in the gutters. "These Christians, how they honor God's plan! The symbol of His Son's lynching above all the temples, and fig leaves for even the cherubs! Well, it's educational to live in a righteous community—since the deacons closed the red light district, their daughters have discovered the joys of sex. A few more holy laws and the next generation may give us the carnal millenium." At that, he was not far from honest fidelity to his own creed. While most males in Corinth conquered and told as one gentleman to another, Jake did not bother to observe even that local convention and when old Mrs. Pelham accused him of scandalous behavior, and with one of his wife's friends, too, replied: "Certainly! Who else can I seduce?—strangers?"

If his graceless candor got him disliked and won him the name of a poser as well as a rake, it secured

him a sort of prestige among his critics. Such a shameless cad was interesting to women and men.

"You're a fool, Jake," warned Martin Starr. "There's talk all over town about you and Julie Messenger. It's bound to get back to her husband."

"He won't believe it. If he does, it's his business to hold his wife. I didn't give her knockout drops, you know."

"What about Beth?"

Jake fidgeted. "Look here, Mart—that's my business. Between you and me, I've never known what Beth knew and what she didn't. Beth doesn't talk—she's not that kind. I don't want to hurt her, and I'm not going to hurt her if other people will keep their mouths shut. And that's that."

What Beth knew. . . . He had sometimes wondered. . . . There in the night when he came in and she was not asleep and she spoke to him and he to her, greetings whispered, studiedly fond, and afterward they lay silent and he knew that she was awake and refusing to ask too much. . . . The feeling that she knew. His guilty conscience? Her woman's intuition? It didn't matter which, he was honestly sorry for her, unregretfully sorry, and to her and for her alone he lied like a husband and a gentleman. For he loved her. No matter how he obeyed that vagabond drive toward other women, in a peculiar way he loved her. A way that was not his way with those others. A way that reserved to her all his tenderness. . . . He did not want to hurt her.

. . . A way that made her necessary; pestered by Julie's fitfulness, he could win solace from Beth's stroke on his cheek. . . . "Poor little boy. . . ."

On a sultry day in June the veterans arrived. They came in special trains and uncomfortable day-coaches, from the tidewater and the hills and the flat monotony of prairie towns, and one from Texas walked his thousand miles on sole-leather and his bronze badge. They came with caretakers and kinsfolk and black mascots shouting unemancipated jubilee. The Daughters came with them, the hostesses, the pretty girl sponsors, the Sons. The bands came and the flags and the uniforms, until two railroad stations were unremitting bursts of music and no thin gray line but a prismatic flood inundated Corinth.

And Corinth met them as expected. The city rippled bunting. Boy Scouts toted their bags, organized receptionists herded them, more bands serenaded them, automobiles sped them to hotels reserved for generals and lady guests, and to private homes where children doubled up with parents so aged strangers might yarn tirelessly after suppers prepared by housewives apprehensive of senile digestions. A hundred of the most cantankerous bedded down in Bull Run City in Sentinel Park where campfires glowed all night before the tents and tolerant visitors learned "what it was like in sixty-five."

Yet at first the city's smile was a little fixed, its

handclasp a shade impatient. "The New York of the South" had climbed a longer way from a lost cause than some of its sisters. None but a Judas would fail to cheer for "Dixie," but in these embattled times an old man confused by traffic is, gray coat or no, but an old man. Jake was not alone among a hurrying populace in tilting an ear toward Flanders and privately wondering if a Confederate reunion isn't more of a nuisance than it's worth.

Then, on the third day, Jake lounged with the Mayor and other notables on the veranda of the Corinth Club and watched a parade. He saw the familiar units pass like so many stale similes. The police. The National Guard. The regulars from the Fort. The cadets from the Academy. The Shrine patrol. The Knights of Pythias. Endless companies of school children. And, with others around him, he clapped and even raised a jocular cheer or two for friends among the young officers of militia.

"Are these school kids going on forever?" he asked Kay Drayton, who was a Daughter and an unwilling sponsor.

"You did this, didn't you?" she retorted, and under her breath, "if you love me, rustle a drink."

"I can't get out till it's over—damn all parades!"

They sat not uncomfortably in the front row of chairs, two bored but polite people in a group of bored but polite people. And suddenly, as they watched, there was an end of marching children, the Avenue came empty to the far turn, and all along

the street there was a silent pushing forward. Chatter on the veranda ceased, in the hush a laugh jangled off key. A new sound was in the air, faint beyond the treetops.

They were cheering back there. . . . Red shirts and shakoes appeared around the curve. Sunlight kicked from a baton. It flashed and fell. Br-r-r-r-boom! . . . "Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton!" . . . Jake leaned forward with fingers plugging his ears. He saw, as the fife and drum corps passed, a man riding alone, a shriveled pod of a man with a tuft of beard jutting out like a lance under an old black hat. He saw a line of old men walking. A few wore gray coats and gray trousers, or gray coats with trousers that did not match, but the majority looked as any old man might look stumping along a country road. About them was a bagginess and a tarnish, and nothing military save the glint of their badges and a ragged flag or two. They did not walk with any attempt at snap or order, for already they had come a long way and it was a long way yet to the cemetery where taps would blow above the graves of the Confederate dead. They plodded as men plod on a steep path. Some lifted their hats mechanically and one jigged from line to brandish his and yip at the crowd. But the most walked slowly under the dingy flags. . . .

"It was amazing," said Jake to Julie two hours later. "Here were a lot of dull but perfectly sane persons in a sweat to get the parade over. Most of

them haven't thought of the Civil War since they were children. They honestly don't give a hoot for the veterans. A number, I happen to know, kicked like hell about the reunion. But when a hundred old mossbacks shuffle into sight, they go crazy. They go crazy! It was perfectly genuine, too. Why, Kay got up and screeched like a she-tiger, and two minutes before she was perishing for a drink. There was old Fetch Larkin—he wouldn't give the committee a dime, but he was pounding my back and yelling that the Confederate Army could have licked the Yanks, the Germans and the Allies put together. I tell you the whole business scared me."

"I don't see why. . . . They're cute . . . I cheered and I cried, too," said Julie.

"You don't understand. Call it anything you like —sentiment, pride, pity, 'Dixie' working on their emotions, true love for the South, it's terrifying to see a mob go hogwild whatever the reason. I don't like it. I can understand cold-blooded hypocrisy, it's their red-hot sincerity that frightens me. It gets you, you know. You're afraid you'll become as fanatical as the rest of them. Dammit, I had prickles down my own spine!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Julie.

Jake laughed. "All right, sweetheart—I didn't meet you to discuss the emotional insanities of Corinth. If we don't hurry we'll get wet."

The sunny afternoon had become forbidding.

Over them the blue sky was changing to slate and in the west a black wall mounted fast. As Jake's car whipped into Tennessee Avenue wind whipped with it and lightning crisscrossed above the empty thoroughfare. This was the "south side," never a fashionable part of Corinth and to-day all but deserted by families gone "uptown" to the parade and the movies afterward.

"We might as well duck in together," said Jake. "There won't be a soul in sight."

"No—please, hon—I don't ever want to do that."

"Oh, all right."

He waited impatiently, watching Julie's figure dwindle along the sidewalk and finally vanish up stone steps. It was a trim figure and he lusted for it. Big drops of rain began to spatter. He got out and put up the top and the side curtains, and by the time he had done that, the rain was coming in gusts and he had to run for it, making the front door in a downburst that soaked him.

Mrs. Gilkison was in the hall with Julie.

"The poor feller!" she exclaimed. "Poor Mr. Jacobs! And him with a bad cold the last time you was here. Come right on back and I'll give you a drink and a sponge-off."

She was a motherly old trull, addicted to wrappers and whisky and apt to be weepy over pets, death and books about chaste, languishing young women. In her cups she always mourned the late Mr. Gilkison, but at brighter moments Jake had known

her to forget she was a widow and to reminisce of a certain Goldie Johnson's home where, as a girl, she appeared to have been courted extensively and, for those days, most giddily.

Mrs. Gilkison bustled into a pantry that was like a combination of a delicatessen and a pet shop. Preserves stacked the shelves and three canaries and a pair of "love birds" competed for attention. It was cozy here with the twitterings, the odor of spice and the storm lashing at the windows. Julie coquetted with the parakeets, Jake mopped his face with a towel, and Mrs. Gilkison continued to be sympathetic while she uncorked the bottle.

She sympathized with Jake about his health and his clothes. She sympathized with Julie as his partner in a misfortune Julie herself bore with fortitude. She scattered, while she poured, sympathy on the birds, deprived so abruptly of God's sunshine. Then, when she had downed a sizable hooker and the rain drummed enticement to another, her sympathies enlarged to include humanity generally.

"Lord save us, the poor folks that are out in this! Cats and dogs and pitchforks. Them that went to the parade and it such a lovely day! With no umbrellas and coats or nothin'! It's lucky for you two it didn't come sooner. All the poor little children. . . . And the poor vet'runs! Them old sojurs marchin' with the rain beatin' their poor old backs and the lightnin' strikin' at their poor old heads!

It gives a body the willies just to think of it."

"The parade was over hours ago," said Jake. "They're all snug as bugs in a rug by now."

"Well, it's enough to make a body cry just to see them," said Mrs. Gilkison, corking the bottle. "Prancin' and yellin' and carryin' on, and a foot in the grave, every one. I'd have took one in myself only it's kind of inconvenient with roomers uncertainlike. . . . Besides, they say they do prefer campin' out, the most of them."

Mrs. Gilkison wiped her hands on her wrapper and waited tactfully. Outside, the rain's fury redoubled—it was a regular cyclone, this one, and Mrs. Gilkison looked up, surprised that her patrons had not moved.

They were usually at it like foxes, these two.

Jake and Julie were staring at each other, reading the same thought in each other's eyes . . . Bull Run City . . . a matchbox in a flood. . . .

Jake shrugged and turned away. "They won't do much camping out to-night. By dark those tents will be washed away, and the veterans with them. If you'll show us which room, Mrs. Gilkison—"

But Julie caught his arm.

"Jiggs, those poor old men . . . out in the open . . . they'll die!"

"Lord save us, dearie, they will that!" Mrs. Gilkison was leading the way along the hall, still talking. . . . Pneumonia would carry them off before you could say Jack Robinson. It took Mr. Gilkison

and it's took a many a man after him. Strong as a horse, too, Mr. Gilkison. . . . She stopped before a door. She waited. Her guests had not left the pantry.

Mrs. Gilkison heard: "But for Christ's sake, Julie, what can I do?"

"Oh, Jiggs—you can do something!"

"I can't stop the rain."

"It's awful—listen to it! I can't bear thinking about them . . . after that parade to-day!"

"Don't then. What's a dead veteran or two?"

"Jiggs! . . . You saw them. . . . They were so old. . . ."

"Really, Julie, aren't you picking a queer time to get tender-hearted?"

There was a momentary silence in the pantry.

"I don't care. I won't stay! I'd be miserable. . . . Hon, we've *got* to go out there. *Somebody's* got to! And it's your job in a way!"

"Good God, Julie! First it's your husband and now it's a god damn army! . . ."

Mrs. Gilkison advanced. A bit of profanity is one thing, but a respectable rooming-house has its limits.

"Mr. Jacobs—the room's this way—"

They looked at her.

"May we have an umbrella?" said Julie coldly.

"Certainly—miss."

Jake swore and pitched a glass into the sink.

"Where's my hat?"

Mrs. Gilkison found his hat and the umbrella. She held him back in the hall.

"I'm sorry for the vet'runs, but I coulda rented that room, you know. And them glasses cost money. . . . Thanks, Mr. Jacobs."

She patted Julie's shoulder.

"You've a kind heart, dearie."

They got pretty wet, although the rain was slacking. In the car neither spoke until Julie said: "Did that old harridan make you pay for the room?"

"Right. . . . She diddled me, anyway."

"Oh, Jiggs,—don't act like that! I couldn't help the rain, could I? What else could we do? Look over there!"

A tree had been blown across the sidewalk. Water rushed in the gutters and at one corner, where a sewer was choked, reached the car's hubs.

"You see?" said Julie. "It must have wrecked that camp. You know darn well you felt bad as soon as you thought about them. You wanted to go, too!"

Jake stopped the car.

"Dammit, Julie, if it wasn't a kid's trick, I'd make you get out and walk home. I don't give a curse if every Confederate veteran in Corinth dies to-night and neither do you. Only you're too selfish to deny yourself the supreme pleasure of pity. Right now you're all swelled up with your own nobility! And getting an added kick out of making me sore, for some reason. Why in heaven did you go out there, anyway?"

"Well—why did you leave? You didn't have to!"

"Oh, no! I suppose I could have knocked you down and dragged you in there by the hair. Next time, by god, I will!"

Julie stared at the wet street. Her mouth was a sullen blob.

"Drive on . . . it isn't doing anybody any good sitting here. You or me or the Confederate veterans. . . ."

Mrs. Gilkison's was two miles from the heart of Corinth on one side, and Sentinel Park lay at the extreme edge of the city on the other. Though Jake avoided centers of congestion and drove fast, twilight was thickening when they had more than a mile to go. The rain had stopped and red shafts from the west streaked the drying pavements, but the storm had washed holes and littered the streets with earth and debris, so that driving was precarious. The number of cars had markedly increased, too, in the last quarter mile, and they found themselves in a double line of slippery traffic.

"Where did all these cars come from?" demanded Jake.

He sounded his horn furiously, but the line only crawled and now another line of cars began charging past in the opposite direction, their lamps blinding in the tricky half-dark.

"What the devil—"

They were at the top of the hill at last and below

them Sentinel Park was a murky vale where a pinpoint of light was all that remained of tents and bonfires and warsongs.

Policemen stood about the entrance. One straddled the highway, gesturing, shouting.

"G'wan there! G'wan there! To the left! Left! . . ."

In the Ford hubto with Jake's car, a man leaned out, running his motor while he challenged the traffic officer. He was a working man. The officer's flashlight shone on his face, ruddy with sweat, on his wet hair and muddy shirt.

He yelled: "Wha'sa matter? I come out here to help the vet'runs!"

"Yeh? Well, they're helped! G'wan! Left!"

"But I come twenty miles!"

"Listen, brother, you ain't the only one—we had cars here from East Point! G'wan! Step on it!"

Jake stepped on it, too. The line swung, charged, crawled, the lamps glared, and still the other line came on, the line they had just left. In the murky vale, Sentinel Park slept, dripping, empty. . . .

"Well?" sneered Jake. They were on the West Lake road. "Somebody had to go, huh? A lot of somebodies seem to have had that notion. There must have been a thousand cars around that park, and every person there on sheer impulse. By the Lord, it is a funny town! Sorry we couldn't salvage one veteran for your tender heart, Julie."

She began to cry, and he stopped the car and lifted her to his knees and kissed her until her salt lips palled.

"That's enough, sweet. . . . Don't mind. I'm sorry—there'll be other rainy afternoons."

But in his own house a mighty gloom clutched him, and Beth saw him come in to her with the exhaustion of the deadbeat child heavy in his face. She held out her arms and his head was in her lap while he told her how a single-handed errand of mercy had been fruitless.

"Poor vets!" she said. "But it was fine for people to do that."

He looked up dejectedly. "Do you think so? I'll admit they're kind—my god, they are so kind! It's a power in them, a tyranny. . . . Beth, I don't want to be kind, I don't want to feel pity like the people in this town do!"

Her own kind eyes puzzled over him.

"But, honey, you were kind."

"No . . . that wasn't why I went . . . I was ashamed not to go, I reckon. And anyway, if I was kind, I'm ashamed, I tell you, I don't want to be one of them!"

"Lamb—you're tired out. That's why you talk so."

Yet after supper, when he had gone to his room and she could hear him moving about and muttering, his words came back to her and she wondered, compassionately and with heart aching, why he had

said that and whither this rebellion against this city and people of her childhood was sweeping him, would sweep them both. . . . Jake squeezed paint from a dusty tube as the dark prisoner in his body strove for release in whirls of color. For a moment, through the muddy canvas, sublimity seemed to flash, not beauty or glory as these people knew it, but a brilliance without sex or form or any human quality save a meaning that satisfied in him something hard and savage and beyond thought. It flashed—and vanished, the canvas grinned like a skull, dead flakes of dead paint, and he took it down and ripped his heel through it. He went out and told Beth he would take her to the movies.

VIII

The West Lake Country Club did not hold its annual Saturday night dance on July first, but on Tuesday there was a regatta in the afternoon with swimming and diving contests, and when it was dark, fireworks were sent up from the boathouse and people on the terrace dined to the spangle of flags in the sky and danced with rockets exploding red and green stars that floated lazily down until their twins rose to meet them out of the black water. Waltzes were popular that year. The orchestra played "The End of a Perfect Day" and if you were out in a canoe, the terrace with its sickle of lights looked like one of the pinwheels and the music came to you on pixies' horns.

Jake and Beth strolled over after supper when the fireworks were just beginning. He had been late coming home from an unexpected call to town, and this had been annoying because it broke into the holiday and she had to attend the regatta alone. She had left early and waited long on the porch in the hot dusk, lonely and dispirited. The blues are so inapt and hence so doubly acute on clear, hot days;

they require the comforting misery of rain. . . .

But he had brought, at last, good humor with him, and flowers, a wet shock of tea roses sacked like wheat from a greenhouse on the way; his kiss was impulsive, and in his shower he sang very badly until Beth, fixing salad and iced tea, smiled and was glad they were but two. She put on her pale green chiffon, and pinned three of the tea roses on one shoulder, and when they walked across the links they held hands while they watched a Chinese flowerpot expire gloriously for independence.

Jake felt fine. In his pocket was a check for ten thousand dollars to the order of Starr & Perry, "payment in full for expenses and services in behalf Confederate reunion," and in his bones was gratification derived both from it and from his lighter business of the afternoon. The ducats, the woman, a cold shower and a good wife—what can man ask? His flannels were immaculate, he was conscious of appearing well, and although he never danced with much gusto unless he was drunk, he would relish gayety to-night. Besides, Beth always enjoyed dancing and his present mood was reactive and uxorious.

At supper they talked vacation and the new car. Jake was dear about little attentions, and Beth described the regatta, which seemed exciting and amusing now. One of the canoes had tipped over with more of comedy than peril to the riders, and among the spectators was Bo Chapman, returned

from France after service with a regiment of Alpine Chasseurs.

"Let's see—wasn't he a suitor of yours once?" asked Jake.

"Oh, he beaued me around when I was young and giddy. He was a nice boy, that's all. . . . He did look perfectly stunning to-day, Jiggs, in that Blue Devil Uniform with the floppy cap and the thingumabob on one arm."

"A beret and the *fourragère*. . . . That means his entire outfit was decorated. . . . So you liked him?"

"He was nice."

"He going to the dance?"

"I s'pose so. . . . Why, Jiggs, I do believe you're jealous!"

"Sure am, Miss Beth. . . . If he starts anything, I'll cut his heart out."

Yet walking across the fairway with Beth delicate and fragrant as one of the tea roses she wore, he wondered, exercising the self-honesty that afflicted him at times, whether he really were jealous. . . . Easy to joke. But are you? Men should be polygamous if feel like. Women, too. Natural and right. Dick Cheney said: "Don't want cake all time, little cornbread goes good." Well, you have mistress. If Beth had a lover, would you mind? . . . He pondered this, deciding he wouldn't so long as they didn't perform the act in front of him. . . . But that was dodging the issue, that wasn't intelli-

gent, that was demanding discretion, what Jim Messenger pretended to preach. . . . He asked himself: are you like everybody else, Jakey? See other little dog take your bone, holler even if you got twenty buried. And going up the clubhouse steps, he said:

"I want to meet the hero."

"Bo Chapman? You'll like him."

"I intend to—whether I like him or not. . . ."

Dances at the Corinth Country Club, Jake had once explained to a New York visitor, were strictly conventional; that is, they were attended by the best people with an agreed upon code of behavior. "Drinking is forbidden on the premises. Therefore, we drink only in the locker rooms, on the terrace, all over the grounds, in parked cars or any lightly populated corner. To be drunk on the floor is a crime. Anyone who falls down or constantly misses falling down is considered drunk on the floor. No rough dancing. When a couple is unmistakably orgastic, they are usually asked to go outside. Fighting or lovemaking is a scandal if witnessed by more than two persons, and a matter of individual autonomy otherwise. All members over forty have a good time in complete innocence and respectability. The rest of us have a good time, too."

Whatever of truth huddled under this description, it was not apparent to the casual eye at the Fourth of July dance. Light, music, color, move-

ment, and plenty of noise. But noise is no sin, ice may clink in water only, and if she were inured to the new cheek-to-cheek fashion and content to sit by the wall, a grandmother could beam through the evening with no thought but how happy the young folks were.

Jake and Beth joined a party on the terrace. Here were crowded tables, with many more on the circling verandas and in the big hall. Jo Buck's Band occupied a platform in the opening between hall and terrace and shivered blues and languors in both directions. It was a gala night, all right.

Jake had a drink and Beth danced. After a while Bo Chapman came over. He still wore his uniform and everybody looked at him as he crossed the floor. . . . "Why not?" he said. "I want all the glory I can get." He winked at Jake and Jake laughed. This was a good guy.

Later, Jake stood in a doorway, watching Chapman waltzing with Beth, and he thought: They look well together, you can tell she loves dancing with him by the way she closes her eyes and just steams ahead, and he likes her, too, but I reckon that's exactly the way she danced with me the first time I met her and I knew it didn't mean a thing. . . . After all, you know she wouldn't even kiss this fellow.

"Would you be jealous of your wife if you had one?" he asked Dick Cheney, who stood beside him.

"Hell, no—she could flirt her head off."

"I don't mean that—if she had a lover."

"And I found it out? Oh, I suppose I'd try to kill the bugger. It's a custom of the country. But I prefer Kipling's idea. 'Make him take her and keep her, that's hell for them both.' "

"But why should you be jealous at all? She might be just as fond of you and still want beddie-beddie with another man once in a while. I don't think I'd be jealous if Beth had a lover."

"The hell you wouldn't. . . . I can see you now. . . . You'd squawk your shame from here to hell and back."

"No, I wouldn't, not if she was still as fond of me. I dare say I wouldn't want them cavorting all over the house, but as a matter of fact, a lover might make things very convenient. Why should I deny my wife any little pleasure?"

"You are a dirty bastard, aren't you, Jake? Let's catch a drink."

On the stairs they passed Julie Messenger, coming down with a wrap over her arm. Jake stopped and kissed her hand, and she smiled at him with the shared knowledge of the afternoon in her eyes, and Jake, going on at Dick Cheney's heels, smiled, too, thinking that she was probably going out in a car with some young buck and would get him all worked up with a kiss or two.

"There went a piece of hot stuff," said Dick Cheney in the locker room. "Dangerous gal, Julie!"

"Dangerous? She's dangerous for nobody but Jim."

"Yeh—that's what you think. Suppose I told you she was telling it all around that you were going to get a divorce and marry her?"

Jake blinked. Something went cold and frightened in him. He licked his lips. "You're a damn liar, Dick. Where did you hear that?"

"Oh, I didn't hear it exactly. But you must admit neither of you has been particularly graveyard. What I did hear, to-night, was that one of Jim Messenger's friends went to her and threatened to tell Jim if she didn't lay off you. She told him to go to hell and she said, for that matter, you'd divorce Beth and marry her if she raised a finger."

Jake poured a stiff drink. "In a pig's eye—the whole business. I don't believe it. She's too scared of Jim, even if the story were true."

"Suit yourself. . . . I'm telling you what I heard."

"Yes, and last week I heard Wilson was a fairy. What you can't hear in this town is too damn bad."

They were having another drink when Martin Starr came in. His face lit up when he saw Jake, but he looked worried as he sat down.

"Hi, gents! I've been looking for you, Jake. Don't mind, do you, Dick? Little matter of business."

"Certainly not," said Dick Cheney, and walked away.

Starr looked at Perry, and his look was not happy.

"Jim Messenger's downstairs. He's pretty drunk."

"Well? . . . That's nothing in my life."

"Oh, cut it . . . the guy's heard something. I don't know what, I don't know how much. But he's shooting off his mouth—I told the boys to get him out of here."

"I still don't see where it concerns me," said Jake, and stirred ice with his finger.

"Oh, for God's sake, man, you don't want him running into Beth when he's this way, do you?"

Jake got up. "I'll go downstairs."

"Wait a minute—"

"Wait hell! . . . I'll go downstairs, I said."

They went together. At the foot of the stairs Dick Cheney met them. "If you're looking for Jim Messenger, they took him out," he said.

The tables had been cleared from the big hall, but so many people were dancing it was difficult getting around the room. They watched until the music stopped, and when Jake walked across the floor they walked with him among the couples standing and applauding. There was nobody much on the terrace. The music began again—"Memphis Blues"—and they stepped back into an alcove near the band.

"I don't see Beth," said Martin Starr.

Jake laughed.

"It's not funny, you idiot. It won't be funny if he meets her outside."

"I wasn't thinking about that," said Jake. "I was thinking about something else."

He was thinking that Beth, by all the odds of irony, should be spooning in a car with Bo Chapman. Well, maybe she was.

"To hell with this," he said. "Let's catch a drink."

"Cut it, Jake—you've had enough to drink."

"I've had three. . . . See you guys later. I don't need a bodyguard."

He opened a door behind him, walked through and closed it. In a small room, three men and two girls were shooting craps on the floor. Their faces challenged him through wisps of smoke, and he distinguished Doris Lutherson, the Hemper girl, Pete Golightly, Bill Hume and a man he didn't know. They were sprawled around little wads of money and a bottle of corn whisky.

"Hi, Jake," said Bill Hume. "Shoot, Hop—he's all right."

The ring hunched forward, the click and patter of the dice resumed, and Jake watched from behind the Hemper girl, who sat cross-legged with bills and coins bunched in her lap, knocking ashes over her evening dress and slippers. Before one cigarette went out she lit another from the butt, and she drank whisky straight from the bottle. They're all pretty tight, decided Jake. He watched until the

dice had gone around again, wondering where he had seen the man called "Hop," who swayed on his haunches a little out from the others, calling to the dice and rolling them with a pop-pop of fingers.

"Dollar and a half still open," said Bill Hume.

Jake tossed a five dollar bill over the Hemper girl's head. He won and Hop cursed.

"You in this, fellow? Then get in!"

The Hemper girl laughed and shifted towards Doris Lutherson, and Jake got down on his knees between her and Hop.

"Sure, bub, I'm in. . . . My dice?"

"Your dice. . . . And my name's Hopkins, not bub, see? . . . And your name's Jake Perry and that don't mean a damn thing to me, bub!"

Jake remembered then. The man was one of Jim Messenger's friends.

"Okay, bub," he said. "Your name's Hopkins and you're not drunk. . . . Shoot a dollar."

He put out a dollar, Hopkins covered it, Jake rolled the dice and Hopkins fouled them with his hand.

"No dice," he said.

Jake rolled again and Hopkins fouled them again.

"Aw, for God's sake—what's the idea?" said Bill Hume.

"No dice. . . . I guess I gotta right to stop the dice if I want to. I can stop the dice any time I got money up."

"Okay, bub," said Jake. "Comin' out!"

He shot and Hopkins let the dice go. They showed a seven.

"Now the two dollars. . . . You in this, Hopkins?"

"Who said I wasn't? I'll take a dollar."

"Okay, bub—but get in. . . . Comin' out . . . Hit, dice!"

The cubes jumped on shiny oak . . . carromed . . . one under the Hemper girl's dress . . . out . . . eleven.

"Now the four dollars," said Jake.

"No dice," said Hopkins, and put his hand on the money.

"Wha'd'you mean—no dice?"

"They hit her dress . . . no dice."

"Like hell they did. . . . Take your hands off that money!"

"Who'll make me?—Not you, you son-of-a bitch!"

Hopkins stayed squatted, and Jake hit from the lever of his knee so that one second he saw two eyes in a red focus and the next a grotesque whirl of feet.

He was up with the rest in a burst of noise and screaming. Both doors banged open and somebody grabbed his arm.

"Turn loose," he said thickly. "I'm not going to hit him again."

Then Jim Messenger lunged into the small space

in front of him, and Hopkins stood up, blubbering.

"There he is, Jim . . . there's the son-of-a-bitch stole your wife. . . . He hit me, too, Jim. . . ."

Jake thought afterward how wizened Jim Messenger looked and that it was too bad for a fool to shout out a man's humiliation in front of a lot of people. . . . Wizened, white and puffy, like something dead. . . . You stole his wife, aren't you sorry for him? As Jim took one step forward, Jake sprang and they crashed together with such a concussion that not until he was brushing at his white trousers and aware of only a few people left in the room since they dragged him off that biting face and took it away, not until Bo Chapman showed him the gun did he know Jim Messenger had fired a bullet into the ceiling.

"You aren't hurt, are you, Jiggs?"

That was Beth, who shouldn't be here at all.

He shook his head, still brushing at himself. . . . "Of course not. Just messed up some."

"Well, you messed up the other guy plenty."

The other people in the room blinked at Bo Chapman as at some one who has laughed in church. . . . You shouldn't say that, you shouldn't laugh, you know. Even if you were in the war. . . .

Chapman laughed again. "I had a time prying you off him. Boy, you're a bull! . . . The damn fool, packing a gun around. . . . What was it all about, anyway?"

"Oh, he was drunk," said Jake. "He and the

other chap—both drunk. We were shooting craps and this fellow Hopkins got sore."

He looked at Bo Chapman. He did not look at Beth. The other people looked at each other and glanced away, quickly. Outside, the "Memphis Blues" started up with sudden, intense enthusiasm. . . . Play, for God's sake, play! Dance, will you? Nothing's happened, nothing's happened. . . .

"You need a drink," said Chapman.

"No, please"—Beth touched his arm.

"All right, honey . . . I'm not drunk."

He patted her hand.

The president of the club charged in. He said, violently: "This is a terrible thing! We've got to hush it up, but I demand an explanation, Perry, they're saying out there you seduced Jim Messenger's wife, that you were with her this afternoon and he found it out, by god, a man has a right to protect his home drunk or not, is this thing true?"

If I hit you, thought Jake, you'll die, you're old and you'll die—

Beth went between them, five feet of ice.

"Mr. Prather, aren't you forgetting yourself? Jiggs owes no explanation to you or anybody else. A member of your club—drunk—insulted him. There is no more explanation. As for Mrs. Messenger, she is one of my friends and I resent insinuations about her. For your information, Mrs. Messenger spent the afternoon with me. . . ."

After a little then—an apology and some formal

shaking of hands and very courteous goodnights —they were out on the golf links with the lights and the heat and the music dying behind them. Only they two now. . . .

Into this silence the moon, full and high, poured its ineffectual radiance. Jake stared at it, and a great wish, yet a great dread of speech were on him as he followed Beth into the dark bungalow.

IX

What I say to him (this was Beth's mind, a battered motor striving to revolve again) must be strong. Well considered, understanding, even sympathetic—though sympathy is perilous—but uncompromising, final. He must know the truth: that this life can't go on. All the small grievances and the petty disappointments, they do not matter, they were part of love. The grating habits do not matter, the moods, the sullenness, the idiotic flare-ups. Nor the lost friends, nor the father who suspects and hates him. Make him know this: it did not matter when he persuaded you to wheedle money from your father, when he spent it foolishly and wheedled you into wheedling more, when he frittered his own money that should have come to you, when he got drunk, when he shocked and insulted your gentle aunts, when he derided old faiths and precious dreams. It did not matter, even, when the dead baby was born, or when you learned there would be no other baby, ever. You did not mind his conceit, you called it confidence. You did not criticize his ways, you championed them.

His faults, his sorrows and desires—you shall say to him—will be yours, except the one. Jiggs—you must say—I cannot give you to other women. Oh, Jiggs! Jiggs! (and this was Beth's heart) I cannot love and suffer any more! . . .

What shall I say to her? (This was Jake's mind. His heart? The heart, says Webster, is the central organ of the vascular system, a hollow muscular structure that propels the blood by alternate contractions and dilations.) What shall I say? . . . You were a peach, Beth, to tell that old ass where to get off. Of course, you realized they were all drunk, and he seemed as drunk as the rest of them, what? All that stuff about Julie! Why, why. . . .

She won't believe you, Jakey. She showed that when she lied about this afternoon. Jakey, she knows. . . . Oh, lord! . . . Well, you're in for it, got to see it through, so wait and see what she says. Maybe she won't say anything and if you're considerate and sweet, if you're offhand but a bit grim about the fight. . . . After all, you know, you might have been killed by that fellow and if Beth gets to thinking how close you came . . . The poor kid! I'm sorry for her, at that. . . . A messy business. . . .

He went immediately to the bathroom, taking care to leave the door ajar, a thing he usually did automatically. Beth, in the adjoining room, could hear him scrubbing. Seated at her dressing table,

hands listless in her lap, eyes fixed on tragic eyes, she marked his low, deliberate grunt.

"Is there anything the matter?" she asked.

Jake came out with one hand drifting ostentatiously from the top of his head. After a moment he put it back, rubbing, fumbling.

"Nothing. I'm all right. . . . Thought that maniac might have singed me, but I guess not. . . . Are you all right—honey?"

"Oh, yes, I'm quite all right."

She added, carefully polite: "I'm glad you weren't singed."

From the side of the bed, where he perched, he could see her face in the mirror and, with a sharp glance, that there was no sarcasm in it, nor for that matter much of pity. He untied one shoe, dropped it to the floor. The silence worried him.

"You were a peach, Beth, to tell that old ass where to get off," he said heartily. "He was drunk and so were all the rest of them. You realized that, didn't you?"

When she made no answer, he repeated, "You were a peach, Miss Beth!"

Beth turned around on the backless stool.

"I did it without thinking. It wasn't just for you. It was for—oh, everything! You, me, dad—for Julie, too, I suppose. Even for the sake of the club, though that doesn't matter. They'll talk just the same."

"This damn town!" Jake got up and hobbled around the room. "I hate it—I genuinely hate it! For a while I thought it was the greatest place on earth, and I can't say I haven't been happy here, god knows it's been good to me. . . . You . . . the business . . . but I'm getting fed up on the business. . . . There's so much scandal and snooping here, Beth. The way people backbite and gossip gives me a pain in the youknowwhat. Now you take to-night—"

He untied the other shoe. He kicked it off.

"You take to-night—"

"Jiggs," said Beth, "I want to talk to you."

He looked at her—and looked away, sticking out his lower lip. He sat down on the bed again. His sock feet hung in pigeon-toed disconsolance. It was coming. It was coming at last. . . .

"Jiggs, we've been married five years. I've tried to make you a good wife, I've tried to make you happy. I—I've been happy, most of the time. There have been times . . . but I don't want to talk about them, I don't want to bring up a lot of old heartaches. If you think I'm hurt or mad at you about anything that ever happened—anything except what I want to talk about now—it's not so. Truly! I don't hold any grudges, I know I haven't been perfect, either, and I hope you don't hold any—?"

He shook his head gloomily.

"Well, that's all right. I'm not mad now. But I am hurt"—she gave a short gasp— "Oh, Jiggs! Jiggs! I can't stand it like this!"

Her fluttering hands should have moved him out of that humped defiance, out of that morose frown. . . .

"Look here, Beth—are you talking about that Julie Messenger stuff?" he demanded. "Shucks, those people were all drunk, I tell you. . . . I tell you that's just a lot of catspit."

"Oh no, Jiggs—no! You *were* with her this afternoon!"

"Well—and suppose I was? Is that a crime?"

"It isn't that. You know it wasn't—just with her. I've seen you together, Jiggs. I've seen you look at her. I—know, Jiggs."

. . . She knew. . . . He put one big toe on the other, took it off. . . . When a little boy is cornered, he makes honest confession.

"Beth—" he stopped; honest confession is also hard for the soul.

"Beth, Julie Messenger doesn't mean a damn thing to me. She's just a piece of human flesh with a little perfume sprinkled on it. Something nice with the entrées. Or a trashy book in a gay cover. Read the book once, and you never want to see it again. Honestly, I don't give a curse for Julie."

"But you did," she accused.

He wiggled under those miserable eyes. "Look —Beth—you're taking this far too seriously. Out

of all proportion to what actually happened. If you call a momentary infatuation giving a damn, if you call being swept off your feet for one day, or one night . . . if you're going to hold a single slip against me . . . one woman . . . Beth . . . honey . . . You know I love you!"

He could lean toward her, but while those torrents of unshed tears regarded him, he feared to touch her.

"I know about the others, too, Jiggs," she whispered.

What others? He recoiled, the words unuttered. . . . What others? . . . The girl in his office the first year, an affair of a few weeks while Beth was in the hospital. He had fired her because suddenly, one morning, he couldn't bear looking at her. . . . The widow in Chattanooga, a pickup in the Patton lobby, a few "business trips," a telegram or two, that was all. . . . The pretty little Pennison child. He had met her when Starr & Perry handled the Sunshine Day Nursery campaign. There was a charity ball, kisses honied with greasepaint, long rides into Autumn nights, then she went away to school somewhere. He could remember only a gypsy costume and the smell of pine needles. . . . Beth's cousin from Boston. Whoever would have thought a Boston girl would leave her door open and wear black lace lingerie? They had agreed, sincerely, it was a relief when Cynthia went home. . . . Mrs. Brown, the florist's wife. He used to meet her in

that place a block from her husband's shop and she always brought him a gardenia. . . . Penelope King, since married. He saw her, sometimes, driving her own car along Cherokee Avenue and he wondered, does she burn incense in a green buddha in her home now? . . . Penelope had been Julie's predecessor. And that was the lot, unless you counted strays and casuals here to-night and forgotten to-morrow. Even they, he considered, had been well hidden from Beth.

"What others?" he demanded.

"Oh, Jiggs, don't let's quarrel about this. I don't want to quarrel. I don't want to rake up what's past and done. But I'm tired of pretending! I'm tired! Do you think I've hired detectives to follow you? My dear, my dear, that wasn't necessary. A woman knows. A woman always knows. I'm not going to name names and squabble over disgusting little details—I don't want to think about them at all!—I'm tired, tired, I've hurt so long!"

She began to cry, the tears simply welling over her eyelids and dripping down her face with very little muscular action except the unceasing quivering of her chin, and Jake hunched up his knees and stared down at his toes, hating for her to cry, bitterly sorry for her in some part of him remote from the hard core, and cogitating while she sobbed: It is too bad, it is very much too bad. I wish she would stop, yet the fact remains that I have been unfaithful to her, and she, who has just come out

with it, knew it all along and managed to be happy, so have I done her any actual harm? Is the mere physical fact of infidelity ever harmful to the so-called injured person? and shouldn't she dismiss it as she might my going to the theater without her, take me as I am and enjoy the very honest devotion that exists between us?

He said to her, coolly: "I don't see why you should be so upset, Beth. Evidently you suspect and condemn me of a great many crimes I never committed and I'm awfully sorry about that. If I'd known it before, I might have explained some things and saved you a lot of grief. But we'll let that pass, I'm not hurt about it. . . . What I do feel is that you're looking at all this most illogically. Assuming that all you believe is true, assuming that I have strayed away from the straight and narrow a few times, assuming that I had an affair with Julie Messenger—what of it?"

He got off the bed and padded up and down.

"You see, I don't think people ought to be jealous. It's a barbarous emotion, founded on a primitive property ferocity, beaten into us by an Old Testament 'jealous god'—nowadays it's largely a matter of hurt vanity. What earthly harm does it do you if I have another woman once in a while? I won't come blatting to you about it, any more than I would taunt you because I enjoyed somebody else's biscuits. I wouldn't relish your parading your admiration for some other man all the time, either.

But I don't see why a little considerate adultery among married people—"

"Don't, Jiggs—don't!" she moaned.

He got a little angry.

"Oh, look at the thing bluntly, Beth. I love you. You love me. We get along together swell. I wouldn't be jealous of you. You can have your good-looking Bo Chapmans. . . . By the way, where were you two to-night? I looked all over for you just before the rucus. Out loving?"

He saw her flinch. He saw the white pump into her cheeks like white fire burning away the tears, and as her eyes blazed at him, he was ashamed of himself for the first time since childhood.

"You dirty man," she said in a low, choked voice. "You dirty—dirty—man!"

He reddened, slowly and painfully, more from his shame than from her words. And he came over and stood in front of her with his head bowed.

"I'm sorry I said that, Beth. I'm sorry I made that dig. . . . I didn't mean it." And as she continued to reproach him with hurt, hot gaze, he picked up her hands from her lap and squeezed them. "You wouldn't cheat on me a penny's worth, would you, Beth?" There was true wonder in his question. "No, you wouldn't—I know it. But—Beth—I can't help it if I'm not made that way. . . ."

She began to cry again, hard sobs as incessant

as hiccoughs, for her strength was run out, her brave determination scattered in the gulf of desolation yawning through her body.

"Don't cry, honey. For God's sake, don't cry that way! I tell you straight—you're making mountains out of mole-hills. What can I say to you? Make a lot of apologies? Make a lot of promises? Beth, what good would that do? I'd break them. . . . By god, I suppose I'm a dirty stinker, but it's worse stinkingness to try to kid ourselves with a lot of sentimental lies. I can get down on my knees and beg your forgiveness and swear I'll never do it again—sure! That's the usual Corinth husband. But I won't do it. . . . I can't! I am what I am and I'll be what I am in spite of all of them. Maybe I can't be myself in Corinth—all right, I'll go somewhere else."

He spat through the open window into the moonshine.

"I'm getting a bellyful of this town. The whole system gripes me. The fine front. The heartiness boys. Three cheers for anyone who thinks like we do! For God, for country and our crowd. . . . The nice people are the worst. Sweet, charming, until you cross them and then they lynch you. If you express an intelligent idea, they're afraid of you and hate you. . . . Well, I don't want to be lynched by a lot of bores, I want a run for my money. And here we are, no better than the rest

of them. For Christ's sake, can't we live honestly what little life we've got?"

"I—don't care where we live," she cried, "I've never cared!"

He laughed drearily.

"No? . . . Well, I dare say they'll have plenty to talk about to-night, maybe it would be just as well if we cleared out. I'd like to, anyway."

"Do you want me to leave you, Jiggs?"

"No . . . no, I don't want you to leave me. I'm damn fond of you. I suppose I love you better than anything in the world, except myself. You're vital to me. I'm not talking about your money, or your father's money, either, though naturally I hope we get it when he dies. It would be fine to have a lot of money. I hate work. . . . But that's not the idea. I'm dependent on you for all sorts of things, emotional things, you're part of me and I'd suffer like the devil if the part was cut off. I'd be very unhappy if you left me."

His feeling was completely clear to her, she knew he meant exactly what he said, and she was not uncomforted. Yet merely to be necessary to a person is so far from heart's desire.

"Jiggs"—twisting her handkerchief, striving for control—"do you really want to leave Corinth?"

"Yes—when this damn business blows over. I'm not a coward. I'm not going to run away."

"Where?—Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere! New York, Paris . . . but they've a war on over there."

"We can do it. Father will give us the money. I'll make him."

The pity of her defeat, of her hopelessness, her swollen eyes. He looked at her with genuine distress, pitying, too, the impulse behind her surrender, the faint gleam of fancy that perhaps if he were otherwhere, he would change, he would be true.

"It suits me, Beth."

He walked to the window. The night, sensuous with all the witch sounds of the lush South, reached in and touched him with its paws. Out there pulsed the delectable Promethean sap, in the wind and the moon's shimmer and the throats of cicadas singing in the dark trees, and beyond the witchcall pulsed the world, dementing with magic. He faced about in a gust of imperative honesty.

"Beth," he said almost gently, "if we go, don't expect the impossible. I'll try never to hurt you—that's the most I can promise."

She bobbed her head up and down, up and down, like a child accepting its punishment.

"I can't hurt any more!" she cried, and threw herself on the bed in a frenzy of weeping.

Jake went to her. He stripped off the slippers and stockings. He made her lift her arms while he drew the chiffon dress over her head. While she jerked spasmodically, face down, he patted the

bare shoulders and passed his big hand along her spine. He rubbed tirelessly. After a while she grew quieter. At last she slept.

He looked down at the tumbled hair and the body that in every sprawled line seemed to cry out its weariness . . . the body that had yearned to him and he had clave to, that had rejoiced for him and agonized for him and to-night had stood between him and menace. Her body which was still his however he might abuse and scorn it. . . . "For whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy god my god." . . . He forgot the rest, but it was beautiful, even if one woman said it to another woman—beautiful to have a person think that way about you. He sighed, patting her shoulder again, and before he put out the lights and kicked off his own clothes, he tucked the sheet around her and got a glass of water for the night table and stroked her hand when she whimpered in her sleep.

The scandal, if widespread, was less serious than Jake expected. Everybody knew about it and everybody talked about it, so much so that distortion was inevitable and the garbled accounts confused his rôle bewilderingly between the heroic and the dastardly. In some versions he was left out altogether—the fight was between Bo Chapman and a German-Jew who defended the sinking of

the *Lusitania.* Jake found himself resenting rather than grateful for these omissions; again the town disgusted him.

The house committee of the club met and decided to leave mess enough alone. Those principally concerned behaved warily. The Messengers were not seen about town; it was said he had beaten her badly that night; it was said she was in Florida, divorcing him; it was said that she had demanded a club apology to herself and the Perrys, and gotten it. In September the Messengers returned from Asheville, and Beth Perry bowed cordially across six theater rows to Julie Messenger, who returned the bow. The men did not catch each other's eyes, but Corinth had witnessed and, under the murmurs, somewhat regretfully jotted a period. Nevertheless, in November Jake asked Martin Starr to come into his office.

"I want to dissolve our partnership, Mart. I've been thinking it over a long while and I've decided to take my chances in New York."

Starr expressed his surprise and distress. "Don't be a damn fool, Jake. Business is fine. We've never had such fat accounts and such rosy prospects. You're somebody here. What's New York got to offer? Better be a big frog in a small puddle. . . ." There was an argument which profited Starr nothing save the information that Dixie's Half Million City was a carbuncle on the backside of America. No, Jake didn't have a job in New York.

He didn't have any plans. He might not do anything for a while.

"But you're not going to leave me flat right in the middle of things? You've got to give me time to make other arrangements."

Jake yawned. "I'd leave you flat if the stake was enough, Mart. You'd do the same by me, wouldn't you? However, there's no rush—I won't leave until after the first of the year if that suits you better."

The senior partner had admired in the past certain cold-blooded forces in his confederate. He decided now that Jake, in addition to being insane, was more than a little crooked, and when the first week in February brought the final dissolution of the firm of Starr & Perry, he was secretly relieved.

"Good luck, Jakey. . . . Write me how you make out."

"Sure. . . . And I'll see you when you come up in June."

But certain cold-blooded forces of life, which bounce worlds and atoms alike in their indecipherable flow, arranged otherwise. On the day the partners scratched signatures to their divorce, the President advised Congress that His Excellency, the German Ambassador, had been handed his passports; the same train that took Jake across the Potomac sped von Bernstorff toward Halifax and home; and in June, instead of clashing glasses in the Knickerbocker bar, Martin Starr was recruit-

ing Corinth's Four-Minute Men for the First Liberty Loan and Jake wrote Beth from an officers' training camp that his feet hurt and he missed her.

PART THREE

X

WHEN JAKE WAS MUSTERED OUT OF THE ARMY in April, 1919, he caught the first train to New York with the appetite of a castaway who bursts starving into the kitchens of Lucullus. Behind him, the prick and snarl of Camp Dix already was melting into the three years' fantasmagoria. He had thought, six months before, never to escape the searing horror of the Argonne; to-day he could recall the color of the brandy in Madame Pescaud's *estaminet* better than he could the ooze from a dead German bulwarking him in a foxhole at San Juvin, and the brandy, of which he must have drunk several kegs during the purgatory after the Armistice, in turn faded to pallor against the signs above the New Jersey meadows heralding the hotels and theaters and restaurants in the Canaan ahead.

In the seat beside him, his late Major insisted on fond recollection. The voice, heart-warming in so many crises of wrack and brotherhood, rasped him through mists of anticipation, and he was conscious of an extreme irritation and a strong wish

that he should not see the Major for a long, long time.

". . . the night in the Montmartre," said the voice. "Do you remember when the girls tied the dildo on old Buxton and he was so drunk he thought they were decorating him for bravery? God! . . . Paris! . . . I wish I was there now. When I think of what we went through, Jake—"

"Don't think," advised Jake. "And don't talk. I've heard enough soldier talk to last me a lifetime. If anybody mentions the war or France or the god damn army again, or says 'bocoo' or 'buddy,' or sings 'Mademoiselle from Armentières' in my hearing, I'll smash him."

"Oh, you'll get over it. You'll be blowing like a Y.M.C.A. secretary in a week."

Major Peddy smirked at the pretty girl across the aisle. The lights of the boulevards sparkled in his stare, all mud and stink and pain forgotten in a flashback to the wines of Burgundy and a few bought kisses.

"It was a pretty good war," said Major Peddy.

Jake grunted. Yet it had been a pretty good war, he might have conceded, for all save the poor devils like those at the last station. An ambulance, swathed faces peering, crutches and a misshapen khaki lump. . . . His right hand had stroked, appreciatively, the firm pigskin of his calves. A pretty good war, after all. . . . He had gone into it greedily, the escape from boredom, the antithesis

of all that fretted him in Corinth, the wild and shining promise. There was even a thrill of patriotism on the night he stood above a quiet keel and heard the Channel slap the boat's sides and watched the lights of Havre. " 'Every man has two countries —his own and France,' " he had whispered, and smelled all Europe crouched like a great and ancient hippogriff, snuffing him out through the dark. . . . Then the rains and the mud, suffering he had never bargained for, boredom such as he had not dreamed could be. You fought, you snored, you guzzled, you cursed the Frogs. The wild promise was a wild nightmare, and you rode the nightmare or you died. He had ridden it hard whether it was the slog of drill and march and billet, or the frenzy and sick fear of fear in battle. He had ridden it hard in those rare leaves to the fleshpots, in the cafés and brothels of cities, and in endless, drab little French towns where the officers gambled till dawn sent them to icy rooms and, if they were lucky, a *bassinoire* for bedmate. . . . Still the hippogriff crouched . . . in the shadow of a cathedral . . . in a vista of straight poplars on the road to Meaux . . . in drumbeats from the Luxembourg gardens and a fancy that the tumbril creaked again and there was far cheering at a barricade. It was not all blood and debauchery; it was Europe; it was a pretty good war. . . .

"You will find me changed, perhaps," he had written Beth, from Bordeaux. "I am fifteen pounds

heavier, my mustache is most military, and after the last bout with a French barber, I shaved my head. Chiefly, however, I feel older. It seems to me I have lived a century since leaving America. It wasn't just the war. The war, after all, was a dirty job and we did it, and they'll never drag me into another. But there's something else, something about this country over here that gets you. I've seen dead men like so much chopped steak, but I have also looked down on Paris from the feet of Sacre Cœur and I think I will remember the Place de l'Opéra at night long after I have forgotten the trenches. It's all done something to me, Beth. I want things I never wanted before. I *am* something I wasn't before. No better in a spiritual sense—god forbid! But life will be different from now on. It's got to be! I don't know what your plans are, and of course I want you to do exactly as you please, as always. But I must tell you, for one thing, that I can't stand the idea of going back to Corinth—"

And much more in the same key. He had posted the letter in all seriousness, and not until the ramparts of New York City dazzled him above the harbor mists did he even question the sincerity or importance of his feeling.

Band music tinkled through the morning. He had gone on deck. . . . Down there, among the other tugs churning and snorting, was one bright with many faces. A big sign rippled: "Welcome

Home, Heroes of the A.E.F." Many voices cheered, the band played, bundles of newspapers whizzed up to the grabbing hands of the enlisted men on the lower decks. Jake, high above them, fancied he saw Beth, and he waved austerely. The tug lay close, the band stopped playing, the soldiers shouted to the greeters, and the greeters shouted back. Jake could not see Beth now, if it had been she. He stared at strangers, and the strangers stared at their defenders. . . . For a moment silence folded the harbor like the silence of an unexpected, awkward meeting. A soldier yelled, "To hell with prohibition!"

Jake lifted his eyes to the skyline, to the fair crags of Babylon, and all the people on the tug, all New York and all the nation behind it, shrugged and went about their business.

"Never mind," he mumbled—"never mind, I'll shrug you later."

But when he saw Beth, finally, at the demobilization camp, he had forgotten his depression. Captain Perry strode across his little monarchy and reclaimed his wife; the orderly discreetly vanished.

After awhile, fingering his Sam Browne belt, "Have you any plans, honey?" Beth asked.

"Only to get out of here and put on a pair of regular pants and the loudest necktie money can buy. Then I want to play!"

She laughed happily.

"Swell, darling! We'll play all right. I know a

lot of people—they're a funny bunch but they enjoy life. Do you remember the Cantrells? . . . It doesn't matter, they used to live in Corinth. They're rather amusing and their friends are amusing— I wonder what you'll think of some of them!"

She laughed again—that low, throaty chuckle he had forgotten she had. Or was it new? She never used to call him "darling" either, did she? . . . Once more he experienced that little chill of the outsider . . . New York . . . amusing people. . . . Even Beth seemed oddly snobbish . . . so assured . . . so occupied. She had not been that way before, surely? . . . But perhaps it was only the way she looked. Smart. Crisp. The cocky little hat. The henna skirt whipped tight to the ankles. He had forgotten how self-sufficient smart clothes seemed to make women. He was glad he still wore, lawlessly, the Sam Browne. . . .

The girl across the aisle moved her legs and covertly he inspected them. The same sort of dress Beth had been wearing, tightly hiding and suggesting everything. Something bold about it, something enticing, yet clean chiseled and American, too. Women in France had not dressed like that. Even in Paris their feet were sloppy, but this girl's fitted slippers made her instep as alluring as a throat. And New York was full of such girls. . . .

The Major demanded decision.

"I'm going to the Waldorf. I can catch a train out at six o'clock, but I may hang over a day or two. What are you doing to-night, Jake?"

"That's up to Mrs. Perry. We're staying at the McAlpin. She's been up here nearly a year, you know, and she has a lot of friends. She probably has something planned to-night."

"Well—how about to-morrow night?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

The Major cocked a boot on the seat ahead.

"Well, you fix it with the wife and then phone me. We've got to kill one last big 'un, Jake, before it's *finée la guerre.* I'm going back to Iowa and practice law and maybe run for Congress and be a stuffed shirt with a lot of other stuffed shirts, and you're going back to de ole S'wanee ribber and de cotton and de hoecake, and snooze the rest of your life, and we'll never have no fun no more. But, believe me, before I go I'm going to have one last rooty-toot-toot. I'm going to shed this uniform toots sweet, get me a hot bath and everything the barber's got, forty-four bell-boys to wait on me, a highball as big as the Woolworth Building and a planked steak so thick you could sleep on it. Then I'm going to buy me a front-row seat for the hottest show in town, catch me a cutie or maybe a dozen, burn this Broadway up from hell to bunghole and back, and if some of these patriots haven't jugged me before morning, I'll teach the Statue of Liberty

the fine art of zig-zig as it is practiced among her Allies. What do you say, Captain Perry—shall we join the ladies?"

"Major—nothing would suit me better. As the first Kentucky colonel said to the second Kentucky colonel, 'Colonel, shall we go by the hotel and register, or proceed directly to the whorehouses?' . . . However, Major—remember I'm a married man."

The Major bleated. "So was Solomon," he said.

The train had stopped. Outside, along a bare concrete platform, hurried redcaps and passengers. Women in those seductive skirts. Men graceless of khaki. One carried a fiddle case, another a child. They rushed, rushed. . . . France seemed very far away. . . . Two Italian laborers passed, jabbering horrendously. A man leaned on a cane, reading a newspaper. The headline said: "Big Fire In Brooklyn."

Jake felt the chill tremor rise in him again, and with it a blaze. The thongs of desire. Not for drink or food or women of the town—not for Broadway, not for Beth, not for the Major. Least of all, for the Major. . . . Babylon called, cold as the pole, hot as life, and toward it he cringed and yearned.

"Manhattan Transfer!" yelled the guard.

Jake fumbled for his traps. . . . "I'll phone you, Major," he said. "We'll get together . . . we'll get together. . . ."

Their room was on the fourteenth floor. It was a big room, almost a suite in its effect, with twin beds at one end and comfortable chairs and a lounge and a writing desk at the other. Beth had been living at a boarding house in the East Sixties. After suffering for ten months her rôle of war widow in a community where nice war widows did nothing save sew dressings for the Red Cross, after deciding she could stitch as patriotically in New York as in Corinth, after bullying down the protests of Old Man Wimbish, whom the holocaust had given back a daughter, she had found an anodyne to loneliness in this mad city and, in the boarding-house, a haven when the madness grew too much. She had liked the boarding-house all right, she said, but . . . the hotel was "special," royal welcome for the returned warrior—was it nice? did he like it?—Ulysses must have the best.

Jake thought the room was grand. He could hear the roar of the Elevated fuse with the blat and mutter of street traffic in a single tone that was the song of New York; he looked down at the monster, at the scurrying bugs, at the golden snake of Broadway; he dug his heels into the soft carpet; he pitched boots, clothes and accouterments into a corner; and he stalked into a glistening white bathroom to send Niagara roaring into the tub. The water was delightfully, incredibly hot. And here were felicities! A mirror brightly lit as heaven. Towels like bear-rugs. Soap that neither

stank nor gritted. And, by god! tooth brushes and razor blades ready to hand for a simple twist of the wrist. All you had to do was stick a coin in the slot and yank a lever. Probably, if you pulled the chain, a mechanical man would jump out and shave you. . . . Gee! it was great to be back in America after twenty months of France.

All this followed their meeting early in the afternoon and several hours of shopping to supplement the clothes Beth had had sent up from Corinth. Most of them either did not fit him now or were out of style. Jake wanted to buy socks and ties of impossible hues, Beth exercised a gay tyranny, together they made a romp of his freedom, and, over tea at the Claridge, he forgot his distaste and talked her the war from Hoboken to Coblentz. He was exuberant, her response was perfect. . . . "It's great to be back, Beth." . . . "It's great to have you, honey." . . . Yet both spoke a flash too eagerly. Restraint dogged them, more a glitter than a shadow—she watching for those changes he had prophesied, he aware of changes where he had not bothered to expect any—and so, though their merriment was far from hollow, they attended it assiduously.

Now, through the bathroom door, which he had left open, he called lustily: "What's the program for to-night, Miss Beth?"

She did not answer at once, and he repeated the question.

"I don't know. . . . What would you like to do, darling?"

"Anything you'd like. I'm high open for anything . . . anything!"

She came to the door with his bathrobe on her arm, and he grinned at her in the mirror before which he stood, naked, preparing to shave.

"Well"—she studied him, thinking how often she had observed him so shave and not fought this sudden twinge of recoil—"well, I didn't plan anything definite. I didn't know how you'd feel." She hesitated. "There's a party down in the Village. The Cantrells asked us to join them. But perhaps you'd rather not to-night."

The Village, eh? . . . He lathered one side of his face. . . . She knew that Village crowd, the intelligentsia, they were beginning to call them. He had been in the Village, once, before the war. The Black Cat . . . that was the place.

"The Village, eh?"" he said. "So you've been trotting with the intelligentsia? The long hairs and the high brows."

Beth laughed. "You flatter me. They're not really like that. At least, not this crowd. Don Cantrell works in an advertising office, Ben Safford's something in a bank, Mollie Mills teaches school and . . . oh, they're just a lot of jolly people, most of them with jobs and responsibilities and troubles like the rest of us. I like them because they don't bore me and they're fun."

She added, conscientiously: "Of course, there are painters and writers among them, but they're not so different, either, do you think? And the freaks —the professional Villagers—well, they're around but they don't matter. I don't know—maybe you'll think all of them a little freaky."

It was the second time she had said something like that, as though she suspected him of misjudging her friends and already was obliquely defending them, as though—and this piqued him—she was actually wondering what they would think of him. If she didn't want to take him on her party . . .

"Look—Beth—would you rather have a quiet evening, just we two?"

That pucker over his eyebrows. Just as always when he was faintly hurt and plotting recompense. Now the recompense was crystal clear: he would be magnanimous and she his debtor for it. She knew him so well. But she would not accept magnanimity; she would, indeed, prefer to delay that quiet evening to which she had so long looked forward. For, if he had not changed, something had, something was different. . . .

Beth chuckled. "We'll go to the party—you'd like to, wouldn't you, lamb? And no wonder—after being cooped up on that old boat. I'll bet all your buddies are going on busts to-night—and he was going to give his up! We'll go to the party, and if you don't like it, we'll walk out on them."

"Suits me," said Jake.

Through the rest of his shave, he frowned at his own image. He was aggrieved and didn't know exactly why. She was right—he did want to go to the party; the prospect, despite her offhandedness, invited him more than Major Peddy's night clubs and chorus girls. But she needn't treat him like a visiting fireman from Corinth. After all, he had been a few places. To a little war, among other things. . . .

"Did I tell you about seeing Anatole France?" he asked as he was drawing on his socks and enjoying the novelty of garters.

"No—really? Where?"

"Town in the south of France. He was living there. We hadn't been over long and the country was very exciting to us, anyway. A bunch of us were sitting at a sidewalk café when this carriage passed. And there was the old boy himself, unmistakable—it was thrilling, like getting into the same elevator with Shakespeare. I jumped up and ran into the street—I suppose it was in my head to speak to him, but the carriage went too fast and all I did was to snatch off my cap and make a low bow. He returned it courteously, but he probably thought I was crazy. . . . One of those crazy Americans, drunk again!"

Beth laughed. "That was interesting. I'll bet he did get it, too—that you were paying him a tribute. You must tell Barry Merrithew about that—he's a professor at Columbia and he's doing a

book about Anatole France. He's not a bit professorial, though . . . you'll like Barry. . . ."

There it was again, the preoccupation with her friends, the undercurrent of anxiety lest Jake misunderstand or be misunderstood.

"Look here, Beth," he demanded, "are you scared to exhibit me to the Greenwich Village Social and Athletic Club?"

"Why, Jiggs!—darling!—whatever put that into your head? I'm proud of you! Why—why—I was afraid you wouldn't like them! They're . . . just people, and you've been to the war . . . and all that. . . ."

Her eyes were wide, she was palpably so surprised that he felt both foolish and compunctious. He had wronged her instead of her wronging him. This restraint—she had seemed different because, no doubt, "he had been to the war and all that" and she was, if anything, in awe of him. He thought: How sweet she is! And how pretty in that black velvet. . . .

He went over and turned up her face and kissed her.

But it was Beth who broke the embrace first . . . with a barely perceptible evasion of his lips, leaving him uncertain of her again and aware once more of the new assurance about her. She could pat his head and resume her makeup—maneuver him out of the way, in short—without appearing to.

"Poor little boy! . . . He's smarter than any of them, and he thought Beth was ashamed of him."

Yet even her "poor little boy" carried a briskness with it. She had said it in the New York manner.

He finished putting on his clothes. As they went down to a taxi, the man in the elevator mirror seemed some other man, well dressed, poised, but with a shifty look in his eye . . . an uneasy, puzzled, yet withal an excited look.

"Silence! Less noise! Cease! Cease!" Mollie Mills clapped her hands, laughing through disordered black bangs at her guests. "Iyota is going to do another dance. This dance is called—what is it, Iyota? —The Dance of the Virgin Cherry Tree for Her Ravisher the Wind!"

The small oriental in the pink smock, looking with his shaggy hair like a pink mattress exploding stuffing, emerged solemnly from cigarette smoke and solemnly took a bow in the only atom of space unoccupied in Miss Mills' not very large apartment.

"Oyez! oyez! . . .

"Hear! hear! . . .

"Put the wiggle on it, Ike!" cried the guests.

From the pit of a square couch which took up half the room, with his shoulders jammed between Helen Cantrell's and Ben Safford's and his knees

doubled so the blonde girl could lean back on them, Jake watched the Dance of the Virgin Cherry Tree through a clear fog composed of his glass of absinthe, the blonde's neck, smoke, perfume, incense and the events of the evening backfiring through his head.

He was having a good time. From the instant he and Beth clattered into that wop restaurant, he had had a good time . . . a huge cellar clamorous with people, a bar down one side, sawdust on the floor, warm rush of alcohol, tobacco and food smells . . . and a shout from the big table. . . . All these were Beth's friends. The tall girl with the cropped hair and the earrings dangling. The freckle-faced girl. The buck-toothed woman in something like a Mother Hubbard. The girl whose eyes immediately said: "Ask me" . . . And the men—big man, little man, ass, "regular," foreigner, snob . . . Impressions hit him like hailstones, names spattered, he was in a chair, somebody handed him a cocktail, he drank, and the big man was poking another at him. . . . The buck-toothed woman said: "You're Beth Perry's husband, I know about you, are you a negrophobiac like all Southerners? I want a negro lover!" While he was still grinning at her, conversation seemed to go amuck all around him and he had to shout that he approved of miscegenation if deodorized. Immediately he was combating a storm of biology and odorimetry, between gusts of which came bil-

lows of words from other parts of the table . . . "bone-dry by June, I'm telling you" . . . "a bloody outrage! Why, in Virginia they opened a coffin and searched the body for booze" . . . "saw her last year in that thing the Washington Square Players" . . . "To hell with 'em! Deport 'em! Whose country do they" . . . "with nothing on but" . . . "theory of the absolute" . . . Beth was smiling at him from across the table, the big man suddenly clapped his back. "Leave him alone, Marietta!—Last year she was a necrophile and next year she'll be chasing Chinamen. Do you know Monk Rawson in your outfit? Let's you and I have a drink. Shut up, Marietta. You're tight as a tick. . . ."

They had drunk a lot, they had eaten quantities of spaghetti and other things, more people kept coming over and saying "Hello, everybody!" a man in a skyblue vest passionately denounced H. L. Mencken, some people were not there any more, the tall girl began singing "Revive Us Again," she calmly dropped her earrings in Jake's pocket; some time Beth touched his arm and said: "Happy, honey? I'm glad." Then they had all left the wop place and proceeded through queer streets and a sort of courtyard to this Mills girl's apartment . . . the agreeable Cantrells . . . and the big man, who turned out to be Ben Safford who did something in a bank . . . another couple who had just arrived from Michigan in a Cadillac, parked

around the corner with, they said, all their furniture in it . . . and this nut Jap poet . . . and the tall girl, still singing hymns . . . and the blonde they called Patsy . . . and the Russian looking fellow she seemed to belong to. Jake couldn't remember when these last two had joined the party, nor did he ever know what became of the girl with the ask-me eyes or the woman with the Mother Hubbard and the buck teeth.

He wasn't drunk, he told himself—the wop place had simply been too hot; now with every swallow of absinthe his vision cleared. He could interpret perfectly the symbols of the poet rushing about in his square foot of space; at the same time he could discuss brilliantly with Helen Cantrell any subject she mentioned. . . . The new Einstein theory? . . . "You see, some relatives are themselves relations. Take the gunfire of a battery" . . . He frowned at the contorted poet. Something was wrong. He tried again. . . . "Some relations are themselves relatives." . . . It had sounded all right when the French officer explained it, why did it sound so cock-eyed now? . . . "some relatives . . . some relations" . . . no, it should be singular. . . . "Some relative are themselves relation," he said, and stared hard at Helen. To his surprise, he discovered she was telling him a joke about Chauncey Depew. He drew back, gloomily offended, and the blonde girl sinuated her neck past his knee and into his face breathed, "You're

cute."—"That," he assured her, "is because our souls are relatives," and, leaning over, kissed her.

The poet whirled like a teetotum, stopped, beat his chest and collapsed in shaggy ecstasy before his Ravisher the Wind.

"Bis! Bis—Ra-a-a-a-a-ay!" shrieked the guests.

"Encore!" bawled Jake. Applauding with the hands, it occurred to him, is difficult when one holds a glass. He tried to get up and couldn't because weights were on his shins. If he could kick them off. . . .

The girl, Patsy, was sitting on his shins. He deduced that she couldn't get up, either, because a man had her pinioned there.

"You kiss him, yes? All right—I fix you!"

What was this all about? The man was the Russian. If they would only get off his legs. . . .

"Keep still," boomed Ben Safford in his ear. So he sat composedly until the girl suddenly jerked free and raked her nails across the Russian's face. People scrambled up, the Russian began to weep, and Jake slipped off the end of the couch and walked into the kitchen.

"Can I have a drink?" he asked Mollie Mills.

"Sure . . . Absinthe? . . . What's coming off in there?"

"Oh, just a couple of relatives getting related," said Jake.

They both laughed. They rolled with laughter. It was awfully funny. . . . When the Russian

and the girl plunged into the kitchen, they were still rocking and chortling.

One side of the Russian's face was bloody. He beamed.

"See," he said to Jake, "I make the amend." He bowed low, "I do not understand—I am jealous—I am a little drunk. You kiss her. It is all right."

He pushed Patsy into Jake's arms, and Patsy twined herself around his neck and gnawed his lips. Jake shook himself loose. He seized her hand and kissed it, gravely.

"See," said Patsy to the Russian, "he's cute."

"I am cute," said Jake. "We're related. She is my cousin, and you are my cousin. We're all relatives."

Whereupon the four, including Mollie Mills, sang "K-k-k-Katy" in a huddle.

Going uptown in the taxicab, Jake informed Beth he had had a swell time. Her friends were all right. And they liked you, she assured him. . . . But, he wanted to know, wasn't there some sort of fight?

"Oh, Patsy and Serge. They always fight. Darling—don't you remember?—you were the cause of it."

"You are quite mistaken," retorted Jake.

"But you were—when you kissed her. Don't you remember—sitting on the couch?"

"I sat on the couch—if that's what you mean."

He felt both hurt and nettled.

"Are you accusing me of behaving badly?" he demanded.

"No, silly. I don't care if you kiss every woman in Greenwich Village."

But that wasn't kind either. Beth was unfair. Beth was sore with him. She was ashamed of him. He wasn't good enough for her friends, huh? . . . her friends, come to think of it, who talked about Chauncey Depew when he was discussing the war. . . .

"If I'm not good enough for your friends, I have friends of my own," he proclaimed with dignity in the McAlpin lobby. He showed her the note that was in their box. Major Peddy hoped he would join the party at Rector's. . . .

"I'm going to Rector's," he announced.

"Oh, Jiggs—dear—don't be offended. It's late . . . and you're drunk."

Drunk! . . . That was the final insult. He left her, very formally, at their room door, and not until noon next day, when Beth poured ice water into the glass that shook in his fingers, did he admit himself a fool.

"Don't be so blue, honey. Was Rector's fun?"

He tried to think. A confusion of din and glare and popping corks. Girls in black tights burying John Barleycorn's coffin. . . . "Pack up your Beevo in your old kit bag and smile, smile" . . . Major Peddy drinking out of a slipper. Somebody refusing to drink out of a slipper. . . . "Aw, hon,

drink out of my li'l slipper!" . . . Her horrible lips slobbering. . . . Somebody shouting: "To hell with this! Jesus save me from bores!" . . . Then cool night and vomit spattering his shoes. . . . "The McAlpin, driver."

He looked down in sick distaste . . . pajamas . . . she must have undressed him . . . put him to bed.

"Rector's was all right," he said. "Was I pretty bad, Beth?"

"Not a bit. You were really quite funny. I had a time taking off your garters, though. You said they were your Sam Browne belt and to hell with Pershing, you were going to wear one, too. . . ."

She laughed, and Jake tried to grin despite his aching head.

At breakfast, after a shower, he delivered a confession.

"I guess, Beth, I haven't changed as much as I thought I had. Still a damn fool. . . . I went off to a war, and the war lasted a long time, and then it ended. We thought the world had stopped for the war and we'd start it rolling again, being somehow miraculously made over into heroes and supermen. But the world hadn't stopped at all. As a matter of fact, we might as well have been shut up in a lunatic asylum for three years. We didn't change. But the world did . . . this New York . . . these people you know . . . they're different . . . you're different."

"Am I, Jiggs? I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "I don't mean that. You're still a swell pal." After a moment, "Beth, do you love me?"

She considered him quizzically. "Do we have to decide that now? Honey, you've got one of those r.e. hangovers. . . . If I don't—love you, Jiggs, I'm quite fond of you. I can't help it. I suppose I always will be. In a way—you're necessary to me."

The words rang a far bell in both their minds, as though they had read them, once, in a book.

"Well, that's fair enough," said Jake. "I think I'll take a little drink."

XI

They lived in Greenwich Village. In a walk-up apartment on West Eleventh Street. You rang a bell at the top of a brownstone stoop. If you rang only once, you would get no answer, or possibly Jake would appear in a crack of the door with a dressing gown muffled to his chin and his hair tousled. He might say, "I'm awfully sorry, old man—I can't let you in now—I've got a girl upstairs." You went away impressed or even shocked; you would not know that Jake had on his dinner clothes under the dressing gown and that you were an undesirable caller. The trick was expedient in a bohemian neighborhood, and Jake relished the reputation it gave him of the devil of a fellow.

But if you rang three longs and two shorts, a latch clicked from a push button and you opened the door and climbed two flights to the welcome reserved for the true friend. The Perrys occupied the entire floor, large living-room, bedroom, bath and kitchenette. The principal object in the living-room was a low, square couch the size of a raft,

covered with black pillows and usually with from one to ten persons. It had a dull gold spread. Many things altered about the Perrys' living-room in the years it served them, but they never altered the couch or the color of the spread, and the facetious never ceased to refer to it as "the couch of guilt."

You would be apt to find almost anything going on at the Perrys'. If it was late afternoon, around five o'clock, Beth might be serving tea. (In those early days the tea was really tea, and sherry and Scotch and mint juleps if you preferred them. In 1920 it was just Scotch, in 1921–22 it was Scotch and Bacardi rum, in 1923 it was Bacardi rum for a while and gin for a while, and after that it was just gin, and if it ran out, Jake fetched the alcohol drum and mixed another gallon.) If it was dinner time, you might find the Perrys formally entertaining, or you might find Beth Perry in an old smock cooking a chop for Jake, in overalls. In either case your participation was entreated.

But it was in the evenings you were likeliest to find almost anything. Beth out with another man, and Jiggs, for a wonder, painting. Jiggs out with another woman, and Beth playing bridge with the bunch. Both in, soberly reading. Both in and the bunch, too, which might mean mild poker or might mean everybody plastered. Nearly always you were sure of ebullient if not sane conversation. And frequently of interesting if not respectable encounters. Demetrius, the Franco-Greek novelist.

George Gay, the etcher. His mistress, Wanda, who ran the Cubbyhole. An actor. A playwright. A Lesbian. A Jew. Once, when the bell rang, the broad-minded Perrys were dining Lincoln Daniel, the colored tenor, and the callers, perforce admitted when to ignore the ring was to insult the guest of honor, turned out to be Beth's Georgia cousins. The cousins behaved very decently, even shaking hands, and the Perrys, by then, didn't care, anyway. That was in the later days after Corinth had become a mere dot between New York and Florida, and those who climbed the brownstone stoop were usually schooled by experience to expect nothing so ordinary as a negro tenor at Jake Perry's.

The bunch, at first, were the Cantrells and their crowd. Those hedonists by force of frustration. Ben Safford. Mollie Mills. Lilith Morgan. Serge and Patsy. The two Jeter boys, Ronald, the civil engineer, and Bobbie, a year out of Princeton and certain that life was a pretty hollow affair. He was forever writing a poem of which the one known line was, "Hail! radiant damned!" . . . They all lived in the Village. They worked, with exceptions who miraculously managed existence by no visible means. Nights and week-ends they played as bootlessly as children. Bridge and poker. Bridge and gin. Poker and gin. Gin and dancing. Gin and argument. Gin . . . Masquerades at Webster Hall. The Kit Kat ball. The Fakirs' ball. The O'Neill play at the Provincetown. Concerts at

Carnegie Hall. You climb ninety flights of stairs and sit on the floor. "It's really the best place to hear music." . . . They had a picnic one Sunday on the Palisades. They played medicine ball for a month in a back yard until the girls lost interest in reducing. They organized a slumming trip to Coney Island. They investigated joints in Harlem and dumps in Little Syria. They shouted and they sang. . . . "Let's dress the cat in Mollie's garter belt and take him to the Brevoort!" . . . "Oh love, oh love, oh careless love!" . . . But mostly they gossiped like any sewing circle. For they knew each other too well, and, be the communion never so sweet, how we do enjoy talking about our friends!

Wanda's Cubbyhole was their rendezvous. It was not, of course, "one of those typical Village places" like the Pepper Pot or the Samovar or Grace's Garret or, if you must be low, the Redhead and Cushman's full of flappers and college boys. Wanda, fortunately, did not run her coffee-house for profit; a new patron had all the sensations of a hobo crashing the Brook Club.

You entered a basement into golden gloom. The gold was the papered walls and ceiling, and the gloom thanked the lighting system, which was candles in Chianti bottles on small tables. But usually the open fireplace blazed at the far end, and a babble of tongues cheered you. It was really a very pleasant Cubbyhole. Then the babble sud-

denly expired. You noticed that practically all of it had gushed from the big table near the fire. That couple whispering over there, that lone and wistful youth, they weren't babbling. A dozen pairs of eyes challenged, a dozen mutes sneered: "Who are you?" And if you were just you, you slid guiltily into the nearest chair, and if you eavesdropped when the babble broke out again, realized that the autocrats were indifferent to your discourtesy.

You heard, perhaps, the names of Renoir and Matisse shouted, or Beethoven catalogued with a phrase, or, if Barry Merrithew were there, a competent analysis of Pirandello, and you might conclude that, if these lordlings were not all artists and musicians, they were persons of intelligence and importance, at least. You would not always be wrong. Nor would you be altogether right should your reward be echoes of domesticity, or the post mortem to a party, or why Helen ought to bob her hair, and you decided that the Cubbyhole crowd was simply transplanted Gopher Prairie.

They were that, and they were the other, they drank no deeper and sinned no purpler than most young Americans, individually they were kindly or morose or lazy or restless as their ancestors before them on plain and farm, but impinging on them always, exciting them and luring them and somehow giving a richer color to their lives, was the city with its beauty and its fury. The city an-

nihilated, but the city inspired, and who felt its ineluctible magic must lift a head and fly his pennon, too.

On Jake the effect of Greenwich Village was exactly what might have been expected after his three years of military discipline and starvation. He had come out of the army with twenty thousand dollars, most of it banked from his old settlement with Martin Starr. In addition, Beth had an allowance from her father which Old Man Wimbish, his daughter lost again to that fellow, nevertheless continued. It would pay their rent and more. They agreed there was no hurry about things. Look around. Enjoy life. Jake might get an advertising job. Or he might paint. Meanwhile—there was New York.

He needed, at first, no other intoxicant than Babylon itself, its deeps and spires. The splendor of upper Fifth Avenue. The pushcarts of Allen Street under rain-wet flares. Desolation by the East River, with the gas tanks huge and menacing as a chimerical movie city. He liked, with Ben Safford, to tramp on Sunday afternoons through the zoölogical gardens or along deserted waterfronts where the next window might reveal ikons, avocados or the tapeworm exhibit of a quack. Pale, bloated parasites in bottles. Ermines and sables in Altman's. The howl of the subway, the chimes of Trinity—all were New York.

Back to the Village, to the snug familiar streets

and the warmth of the Cubbyhole or, in summer, some shady garden. Back out of Babylon into the reassurance of one's own crowd. The excellence of sipping a frosty Collins and talking intensively of one's self.

Says Ben Safford: "Listen, Bobbie—what the damn fool did. We were on the Bowery—see?—when a panhandler hit us. I was all for giving him a dime and shoving on, but Jake stopped. He let this bum do his whole act without a word. Jake just leaned on his cane and listened, and the fellow warmed up something wonderful when he thought he had his man. Finally he reached the crisis, a 'loan' of five dollars, and Jake said solemnly, 'But my good man, I don't know you!' We were a block away before the guy came to sufficiently to call Jake a bastard."

"I don't think that's funny," says Bobbie. "It was stupidly cruel. The trouble with you, Jiggs, you're an exhibitionist. Any audience will do, merely Ben and a panhandler."

"That's not true—he had it coming to him. You mean I'm not a sentimental fool. If I'm an exhibitionist, why didn't I give him the five dollars? My generosity would have awed Ben and the bum would have blessed me so the whole Bowery could hear."

"Because generosity is a virtue and nobody is interested in virtue any more. Virtue is dull. You're a sadistic exhibitionist. And a bit of a masochist.

You got a kick out of the bum cursing you publicly. Besides, it didn't cost you a cent."

"So I'm stingy, too?"

"No—you'd probably burn money if others regarded it as an interesting gesture. I didn't say 'noble,' mind you—interesting. At the same time you'd stick me for lunch because the average man reaches for the check. All you want out of life is attention. You're just a movie actor at heart."

"What do you want out of life?"

"Nothing—and that's what we'll all get."

"I see—the lost generation again. You know, Bobbie, you take your disillusioned young novelists too seriously. Most of us got over that with Kipling. 'We have done with Hope and Honour, we are lost to Love and Truth. . . .' "

"Kipling? My word, Jiggs, you are a doddering old gent!"

Hours of such conversational self-abuse. The double pleasure of deflowering and of being deflowered. They were addicts. They were experts. They could take the angels or the habits of cats and twist either unfailingly to the personal equation. They could begin with China and at once enjoy mutual castigation. For they esteemed each other and, in the manner of men, vented it in calumny. Had it not been for the protests of their bored and long suffering womenfolk, they would have turned all social gatherings into debates on

the relation of the rest of the universe to Perry, Jeter and Safford.

This was the inveterate trio, though Jake in time became its nucleus, to dominate it as an object of attack, and, even were the other two absent, somehow to inject himself into the line of anybody's gunfire. He was singularly provocative of criticism; his friends picked up his remarks and his habits with a kind of cannibalistic relish; and Jake was the last to deplore the blood shed so long as it was his.

Yet not swiftly did this rôle of the world's willing target develop. Nor could it be proved, as Bobbie Jeter one day was to charge, "The fellow deliberately set out to get himself vilified because it was the easiest way to achieve distinction."

Jake, in fact, had lit in Greenwich Village with much the same delight, and the same naïveté, as a child entering his first movie show. He had soon gotten over his initial feeling of an outsider. If Beth's friends had taken him in as Beth's husband —the man of the girl who had charmed them because she was both a Southern lady and intelligent—they had come to regard him as an individual in his own right. Striking looking—with his height and his stumpy hair. Good talker on perverse topics, and odd facts stored in that bullet cranium of his. Yet ready to laze or frolic. One of the bunch, all right. George Gay declared he had talent if he would but use it. Barry Merrithew found him both

a good golfer and an appreciative companion. Most women took their cues from Beth—what boys our husbands are!

The bunch stirred in the boy-man himself more consideration, perhaps, than its members warranted. To be invested with people who write and paint, to know women with views as weird as their earrings, to golf with scholars and to drink with business men who can discuss French literature—these encounters not unnaturally impressed an impressionable hungry for glamour and newly released from the double yoke of Corinth and the Army. Not for some time did George Gay strike Jake as a frightful bore or Lilith Morgan's jewels and sapphism repel him equally, and he was never to confess that his reactions during his first year in the Village were practically tantamount to his reactions during his first year on a newspaper. Once more the lions stalked free and golden, the argonauts strode the decks, and in due course the irrepressible egoist itched, the marked man felt the blood cry out for the brand.

To say exactly when Jake Perry acquired a name for eccentricity in the mouths of his friends, would be as difficult as dating accurately the birth of man. There was the matter of his hair. Its brevity was natural so far as Greenwich Village knew. When he at length admitted regular croppings, his explanation that bristles were cooler and less troublesome had been accepted as rather sensible;

only later on, after an accumulation of the odd, did persistent baldness take on the suspect color of other traits. There was the matter of his clothes. None could say when he first began wearing Chinese pajamas and Russian smocks at home, or popping out into the streets in overalls, an old sweater and a beret. His effects sprouted like new buildings in a neighborhood—overnight you forgot what was on the corner before the drugstore came. And he was so bland in his theatricals, the blander the more the gallery booed. If you deemed the iron bracelet on his left forearm something queerer than a wristwatch, he tolerated your stupidity good-humoredly. You had to admit it was no popinjay's ornament. There was, in fact, none of the nancy about Jake's little caprices. If he were perverted—agreed his friends in those increasing pow-wows concerning him—he veered in no homosexual direction.

All the evidence at the pow-wows insisted on a bizarre quality in Jake from his advent in the Village, but nobody ever told a yarn of actual outbreak predating Jake's block party, and that was in 1920, more than a year after the Perrys moved into West Eleventh Street. If the boy-man had felt the need of self-expression before that, he must have taken it out in talk.

Nineteen-twenty, New Yorkers will recall, was a great summer for block parties. The number of

roped streets in the Bronx enraged motorists, and below Washington Square, in the Italian colony, scarcely a night passed without a glow in the sky, "Santa Lucia," and huzzas and banners. Residents of lower Fifth Avenue, however, did not expect their quiet to be shattered by the roll of an African wardrum, and diners at the Brevoort were startled to find their way thither impeded at one point by ropes stretched from trees to brownstone pillars. Inside the ropes a man sat on the sidewalk. He was dressed peculiarly in robes, and as he squatted on his haunches and beat the drum, he moaned and bayed. The scene was illumined by a candle mounted on a butter-tub. If pedestrians stopped, the man stopped beating, too, and said politely, "I am giving a block party, will you come to it?" They either laughed or shook their heads and, in either case, moved on, for the drum's boom was deafening; some did not stop at all, they glared at the man and hurried by in a sort of panic. After while the man got up. He said disconsolately to the woman seated above him on the stoop: "Nobody will come to the party." She answered: "Don't mind, honey—I'll come," and she walked down the steps.

They were doing a little dance around the candle when the policeman arrived. The woman went up to him and said: "Please, he doesn't mean any harm. I'll make him go in."

"Is he drunk?" demanded the policeman.

"Only a little bit," said the woman.

"Well, what in Jasus' name does he mean makin' that unholy racket?"

"He's giving a block party. His own block party."

The policeman stared. The law is vague on the subject of individual block parties. Meanwhile, the man stood patiently in his extraordinary robes. Now he said with respect approaching humility: "May we finish the dance? The party will be over then."

So the policeman waited with a knot of puzzled spectators until Jake and Beth danced twice around the candle.

"You better take him in, lady," said the policeman.

"Oh, he'll go now, won't you, honey?" Jake picked up his drum and his butter-tub. . . . "Thank you so much, sergeant."

Her smile appeased him. But Jasus! This Village crowd was the nuts! . . .

When the story of the block party got around, it excited mixed comment. Most people laughed, some said Jake was a disgusting show-off, and nobody denied he was a fool. Yet a fascinating fool. Did you hear—so they bubbled when the tale was long a classic—about the other time he beat the drum? Or the time he sang with the Salvation Army? Or the day he and Wanda got tight and sat for an hour

on the Fifth Avenue curb discussing their souls? Or the incident of ordering and eating raw meat in the Lafayette cardroom? For the block party was but the acorn of an oak—the pantagruelian legend of Jake Perry, whom a few loved, many derided and everybody knew about.

"But why," a stranger would demand, "does his wife stand for it? She's rather nice, I hear."

"Oh, she handles him like a mother treats a quaint child. About the only person in the world who can handle him, too. Still in love with him? Oh, I don't know about that. . . . They're awfully good friends, congenial and all that. You ought to meet Beth . . . swell person. . . ."

Thus the bunch. They saw her as the fitting companion for a *poltergeist*, an efficient manager for their comedian, the keeper wisely appointed by providence to coddle lunacy which, after all, may be the rash of genius. As an individual she was, as they said, "a swell person," poised, intelligent, gay without malice, the perfect hostess and the ever desired guest, with a knack of sympathy for anybody's manias. Women were more than apt to trust her with their secrets, and men swore by her without wanting to kiss her. Yet, so lurid was Jake's reputation and so tolerantly did she subordinate herself to his humors that one seldom considered her apart from her rôle of wife—you might catch Beth for a moment in the wings, as it were, but be sure she would have an ear toward the stage and might leave

you instanter if the performance seemed to be getting out-of-hand.

That subject of their relationship . . . well, you took your choice of opinion. Even the bunch wasn't sure. This is an enlightened age, you know, and plenty of husbands and wives have intelligent understandings. Of course, everybody knew about Jake's women . . . the girl over at the antique shop, the girl who painted his portrait, Lilith Morgan's room-mate and the row *that* caused, the waitress Wanda had for a while . . . some said, Wanda herself. . . . Jake had made no bones about most of them, likely as not that business of the rumpled hair at his front door was no bluff half the time. But Beth . . . you couldn't tell. She had her friends, the theater and dancing with other men. Ben Safford was always at the Perrys. So was Merrithew. And poor old Ronald Jeter was openly, doggily in love with her. But you couldn't tell. Pretty sophisticated person, Beth, but pretty close-mouthed, too. Living in Greenwich Village . . . living with a Turk like Jake. . . . But a pretty swell person. A lady, that's that. . . . What do you think—what do *you* think?

At least, she couldn't be jealous. At least, she stood for Jake.

"Why don't you quit him?" demanded Mollie Mills, infuriated by Jake's indecorum at a party. He had carelessly left a bedroom door open.

"Quit him?" Beth smiled, though her hands shook on her wrap's clasp. "Why should I? For that? . . . Jiggs is the most amusing man I know. I never can tell what he's going to do next. That's rather dreadful—sometimes. But it's exciting. . . . It's fun living with Jiggs!"

She might have added that it was heart-burning, too. But she would never cry that cry again. She had cried it, once, on a night in Corinth long ago, and on the bed she had made that night she would lie stoically, though it pained, though it were lonely.

Jake slunk to her in repentance.

"I'm sorry, Beth. I'm sorry I didn't have more sense than that . . . humiliating to you, I know."

Her hands were steady now. So were her eyes. His did not meet them.

"Do you remember, Jiggs, some time after you came back from France? I told you then I had no control over your life, that I had no wish to control it. . . ."

He remembered. The embarrassment of that afternoon was not easily forgotten. Beth's key in the latch. The girl's terror and hasty flight. His own confusion of the little boy caught in the jam. . . .

"I asked you then to do one thing for me—have the decency not to parade your affairs in front of me. I don't want to know about them, but if I must, I sincerely prefer to be warned beforehand. After

all, I am your wife. I happen to feel that, because you are my husband, I have no right to interfere with your desires, whatever they are, but I am just a little bit fastidious about witnessing the fulfillment of some of them."

"I'm sorry, Beth," repeated Jiggs. "I'm truly sorry, Miss Beth."

He went about like a humbled servant for three days and afterwards, except when he was very drunk, managed his infatuations discreetly. He could not mourn for long. Life was too droll, he was too busy an actor in it. The lion stalked with the lions, Jason flung his sails, pleased with himself and with the argonauts of both sexes . . . until the inevitable. History insofar as it touched Jake Perry, conformed to the cycle.

He had been a Villager exactly two years and Pantagruel's legend was sturdy when, just as he had sat one day in his cartoonist's office in Corinth, brooding on his lot as one of the boys, he slouched in a corner of Helen Cantrell's studio and pouted at the scene.

Helen was giving a party. One of those teas. But neither Ben Safford nor Bobbie Jeter was there. He had walked away from George Gay in the middle of a sentence. Beth was hemmed in by two bores. Most of the other people were dull friends of Don Cantrell's from the advertising office. There were no good-looking women. Nobody,

in short, to talk to. . . . Entering through the kitchen, Jake had at once informed his hostess he didn't want to meet anybody and she had laughed and said, "All right, darling." One permitted boymen to pout in corners. . . .

Now a name whipped Jake out of a buzz of conversation—his own. It came from two unfamiliar bobbed heads above the back of a sofa at his left.

". . . says he's coming here. Have you ever met him?"

"No, but they say he's terrible. Typical Greenwich Villager."

"But I think they're cute, don't you? I think Tiny Tim's cute . . . you know, selling the soul candy at the place the other night. . . . I'll bet this man's cute, too."

Jake got up. He returned to the kitchen and asked Don for a drink of gin straight, and was a little annoyed when Don did not understand that he meant a glass full. That was the night Jake ate the raw meat at the Lafayette.

Even next day, in the throes of his hangover, the throb in his head was not as bad as a deeper nausea . . . "typical Villager" . . . Soul candy for slummers! . . . And though within the week he was wearing his beret as unconcernedly as ever and defying Bobbie Jeter to prove his essential rascality, fits of sulkiness descended on him, he puttered around with some charcoal and a canvas,

and once he put on full evening dress and took Beth to hear "Tristan."

It was about this time that Jake met Bellerophon Cawdor.

XII

One winter Bellerophon Cawdor appeared in New York, none knew whence. He vanished by Summer, none knew whither. The impression he left—of suspicion, ridicule, fear and downright hatred—was out of all proportion to the brief swoop of his wings. . . . A dark buzzard of a man. The head sunk hairless and neckless abruptly into the granite body. The bulging forehead. The nose broken in the middle like a bent knee. The cruel mouth, forever smiling. The eyes, of which it was asserted but never proved that he could blink across them a yellow film at will. Yet a man women would cross a room to meet.

Some said that he was an Afghan and others that he was an Armenian Jew. More likely he was Irish, possibly with a fleck of the East, though he was too ready with his indifferent shrug for the latter to be quite credible. Certainly, whatever his blood, he was the product of extraordinary education. Erudition poured out of him like sweat; he knew nations as other men know cities, and if it were not true that he left Oxford for a Thibetan monastery, it was a fact that he could discourse with Arab or

Malay in his own tongue and once, challenged to prove a statement, did it with a copy of "Charmides," inscribed unmistakably in the poet's own hand, "To my dear Bellerophon, *ab imo pectore*, Oscar, London, 1893."

Jake met him in Wanda's Cubbyhole, where Cawdor had come one night with George Gay, acquaintance of student days in Paris. The firelight revealed the stranger as a gargoyle, and Jake, entering, felt curiosity with a glimpse. He crossed at once to the big table and, when George Gay began to speak, held out his hand.

Cawdor had risen, suddenly and surprisingly tall, but he did not shake hands. The omission would have been insulting in anyone else; Cawdor endowed it with custom. He regarded Jake, eye to eye. He said, distinctly: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." He sat down as though he had remarked, "Happy to know you."

Jake did what most people did when they were introduced to Bellerophon Cawdor, before they were aware that this was his unvarying form of greeting—he laughed. Cawdor paid no attention to the laugh. He paid no attention to anyone while conversation was resumed around him. He smoked a calabash and stared at the fire. After while he got up. In the quick hush he said, "Every man and woman is a star," and departed.

"My God," said Jake, "who in the devil is that nut?"

Then George Gay told them some of the stories about Cawdor, and though nobody pretended to believe for a second any of that balderdash about mystics and demonology and hunting for the life plasm with human specimens in a lonely château in Provence, they were all arrestingly silent the next time that brute head stooped at the Cubby-hole entrance.

On this occasion Cawdor talked. He interrupted a wrangle between Jake and Bobbie Jeter with an unexpected, high cackle.

"You are discussing the laws of human conduct? There is no law except the law of Theleme. Love is the law—love under will. Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." He turned savagely on Bobbie. "You are a fool, squirtling. Decency? Justice? These are words invented by school-masters to take the place of their bowels. Men of sense live like scoundrels. Thus they are sure of their reward in this world, where only virtue is punished and vice wins its deserved benefits. As for the world-after, does not Baphomet watch o'er his children?"

He bowed to the group, his smile imperturbable.

"My apologies to the ladies. We bore them with rudiments the sex acquires at suck. Let us choose more interesting subjects. That, I believe"—the calabash waved—"is French porcelain, and, unless I am very much mistaken, a Limoges piece," and for half an hour he fascinated them with a history of ceramics.

"Every man and woman is a star," he concluded. His shadow seemed to stick in the doorway. . . .

Bobbie Jeter hated Cawdor thenceforth. The rest laughed, but Bobbie would not stay in the same room with him.

"That is a bad man. Not natural bad like the rest of us; he'd be perverted in hell. Oh, he's a charlatan all right, half his stuff is cribbed out of Rabelais and those old boys—but he's bad to the bones all by himself. He's a bigger faker than you'll ever be, Jake, and when it comes to sin, you're just a little child eating offal in a barnyard!"

They continued to laugh, partly at Bobbie and partly at Cawdor, only Jake's laugh was not the loudest. A thing had happened to him—out of half a dozen encounters with Cawdor he developed a profound feeling, not so much of admiration as of truckling envy. He expressed it to himself, "The fellow has something for me," and believed the feeling and the man unique in his life, forgetting there had once been a Shag Kenny, or a Harrison Traylor, or so late an argonaut as that intolerable dullard, George Gay.

What was it? Cawdor did not dress queerly. On the street he might have been taken for a thrifty workingman. He did not drink very much. He played chess instead of cards. He abhorred being conspicuous in a crowd. If his hails and farewells, his rude silences and sharp outbursts, were un-

usual, he yet was capable of ordinary conversation as chatty as a débutante's. Some deeper quality drew Jake—the rumble of the sinister under George Gay's anecdotes, under Cawdor's own talk with its dash of the cryptic and the supernatural. Perhaps it was the appeal of evil to the vicious in himself, perhaps he was nettled by Bobbie Jeter's scoffing, perhaps Beth's little boy merely came down with a mild case of hero-worship. In any case, Jake was glad when Cawdor asked him to call.

"Come to see me."

A command rather than an invitation. And he alone of the Cubbyhole crowd received it.

The house on Washington Square was old and red and fusty with the rot of the years. A wicket gate opened on a walk and a yard scrubby with privet, and on the afternoon Jake ascended the worn steps rain dripped among the shrubbery and made a mist over the Square. He rang the bell with curiosity warm in his veins, but the door giving to his push seemed to lead him from mere dampness into dank. He stood in the gloomy hall, waiting uncomfortably for some presence other than a latch's click.

"Come in," said Cawdor's voice at his right. He turned the knob he could dimly see.

Long afterward Jake was to tell the story of that afternoon with the embellishments of a Grand Guignol shocker. The fact was that cheery firelight lapped a fine old room, and in its glow sat a

naked woman whom Cawdor was pricking with a dagger as urbanely as an old lady might knit.

"Have a seat, Perry," said Cawdor without deflecting an eyelash from his occupation. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Jake moved across the room to a couch, where he sat down. He perforce faced the woman on the floor, unashamed and stoical a few feet away, and Cawdor in profile stooped at her side, adroitly making tiny slits in her flesh between the firm breasts. The woman was young, her eyes smoldered through Jake and beyond, she seemed impervious to his arrival or the pain, and though blood trickled between her spread knees to the rug, neither she nor Cawdor made any move to stem the flow or mop the puddle.

One does not observe torture, presumably, without interfering or hastening away. But, though Jake's astonishment was supreme and his excitement immediately beat high, he behaved with the decorum of a pastor visiting the sick. A mind pounded by twin shocks of lust and cruelty, said in effect, "Steady—nice people don't point." So Jake, as any guest waiting for the host to finish dressing, pretended to observe the room and strove to keep his eyes from the fascinating incision. It was, he could not help but note, in the form of an inverted cross.

"*Respice finem*," said Cawdor. He picked up a

towel from a chair, wiped his hands and tossed it to the woman. "Clean that mess."

Then, matter of factly, "This is Justine, Jake Perry."

The girl bowed and went on scrubbing the rug.

"And how have you been, my friend?" Cawdor seated himself, packing his calabash. He talked about matters of casual interest in the Village, and Jake answered in kind. Evidently, so far as Cawdor was concerned, a woman had been branded, the iceman had been paid, the telephone had rung and he had answered it—well, if that was the way it was, Jake could take brandings right along with wrong numbers and delivery boys.

They discussed Masonry, Jake having noticed a ring with what he took to be a Masonic symbol. It was, it seemed, Rosicrucian, a lore on which Cawdor scintillated. These mysteries, Jake reflected, are advancing a long way from Corinth Blue Lodge Number Forty. He inspected certain paintings. They were Cawdor's. "You paint, don't you, Perry? I fooled with it a bit at Julian's, but I can't stomach the grundyism of Art. Any art. My daubs at least bleed, but painting's a eunuch's medium at best." Jake admired the technique as nonchalantly as though Cawdor's subjects had been lilies instead of what they were. He eyed the books, stacks of them, in German, French, Hebrew, Arabic, the English titles flashing provocatively . . . re-

ligion, philosophy, sex, magic . . . "Flagellation and the Flagellants, a History of the Rod in All Countries" . . . He was to come back to the books.

Justine served them Turkish coffee. She had vanished, to return shortly in a chaste smock, and though she did not attempt to compete in the conversation, sitting almost primly on the floor at Cawdor's feet, she answered in a low, sweet voice when Cawdor addressed her and smiled at Jake when he made his adieus. She is like a Quaker, thought Jake—Quaker with an inverted cross.

He kissed her hand.

The gallantry brought a startling interruption. Cawdor struck the girl's hand sharply down, his face thrust itself into Jake's, and it was the face of an ape. Suddenly he shivered, and slowly the lines of satiric benevolence flowed back into the mask.

"Your pardon, Perry. I'm an ass. I cannot endure to see a hand kissed." He laughed. "But you kiss them? You kiss them! Fancy the significance of that! Have you ever been flogged, Perry? Did you enjoy it?"

Jake, who had been astounded, saw red. He snarled at Cawdor, "Try it—I'll beat you till you yell! You and your snotty little Freudian drivel—I'll smash you now if you like. . . ."

Cawdor was grinning. He made the sign of the cross.

"Samael protect me. Come, my friend, I have apologized. I apologize twice. The hand was

Jacob's, but the voice is Esau's, the cunning hunter. The law of bipolarity prevails and I salute my brother! I like you, Perry."

He clapped Jake on the shoulder. The girl had stood by calmly, as if to endure whatever was, be it a battle or her own mutilation.

Jake went away from that visit with warring emotions. If this fellow thought he could frighten people with a lot of old-fashioned hobgoblins out of Krafft-Ebing, he was a fool as well as a faker. That absurdity about the hand! A piece of cheap theatricals. If Cawdor tried to bully him with any more insinuations, he'd prove which was the sadist and which the masochist! Stakes and bullwhips . . . Jeremiah . . . out of boyhood a girl-cry . . . "Lawd, oh Lawd!" . . . He spat, rubbing the back of his hand pleasurably against his teeth. And yet, and yet . . . Cawdor had apologized. Cawdor liked him, he had said. Damn the fellow, there was a spell about him. . . .

So Jake returned to the red house on Washington Square. To the afternoons of coffee and conversation. To Cawdor's delirious expositions—of life, of death—of good and evil—theories and fancies steeped in the man's genuine scholarship, pebbled with witchcraft, astrology, necromancy of all ages and countries, ranging from Sixteenth Century vampirism to modern sexual psychopathy, yet always tainted with Cawdor's odor of the bogus.

Jake would strike back; in argument he more

than often held his own, and Cawdor undoubtedly found him a worthy antagonist and agreeable companion. But at all times Cawdor's was the rôle of tutor to pupil, and Jake, had his own ego been less, must have felt and resented this constant air of king and slave.

Usually Justine was their silent audience. Silently she went about, serving the master, silently she sat in her corner. She was kind and simple, Jake decided; he grew to like her; once, while he waited for Cawdor, she told him something of herself. Her name was not Justine, it was Sarah Pardee, and she had been a New England school-teacher until she met Cawdor. "I followed him"—thus she said it, as Peter might have said it to the other fishermen.

What warped heritage, what strangled desires had been hers? What rites of pain and pleasure were hers now? Jake speculated, for the scene with the dagger had not been repeated and only its vividity remained to convince him that below the nun's face a wound healed. Yet she did not interest him much. "Cawdor's woman." An appendage like the ring and the paintings. One of the magician's props.

The magician was the show. Cawdor was the magnet. As he drew Jake, so he drew to the red house a herd of men and women of varied stigmata. They differed in creed and race; they were intelligent and they were stupid, at least one was rich and another had been a king's mistress, they shared

little in common save the bond of their uncommonness—they were the botched, they were the blessed, as you looked at it. Most of them Jake never saw again, but if ever he did years after, whether in a drawing-room or a ragged face above a park bench, the image of Cawdor rose before him and the sorcery of Cawdor walked again. For they all, with him, acknowledged Cawdor's power and, though they might fear and hate Cawdor, granted him domination.

Cawdor in a dinner jacket, discoursing on the Irish poets. Cawdor playing chess, directing his moves while he mingled and joked with his guests. Cawdor on his back in the middle of the floor, chanting gibberish to an African idol . . . "Oom ma na padma oom. Oom ma na padma oom" . . . They say he eats opium. They say he was a yogi. They say he cannot go back to England. They say he killed a woman in Paris. He fought with the Canadians at Cambrai; decorated for bravery. He claims, you know, to be the reincarnation of Judas. . . . "I am Baphomet! I am the Beast 666! . . . To-morrow night, my friends, we celebrate Gethsemane. You will all come?" . . . That was the Black Mass, the blasphemy of St. Secaire. Incense burned under a scarlet canopy, across an altar a golden serpent seemed to crawl. The hooded figures sprawled on divans while Cawdor, in his monk's robes, lit the seven tapers. Somewhere a lute played softly. The serpent was gone now, in its place a

girl, "a maiden pure in mind and heart and body," limp and nude across the altar. The white figure hung motionless, bearing the silver chalice upright from the navel to the priest's lips. . . . "Redeem us from virtue. . . . There is no good. Evil itself is good. Blessed be the name of Evil! All hail, Prince of the Earth, to whom God himself hath given dominion!" . . . In the stifling dark the voice boomed inhumanly, and there was no music, only the sound of bleating.

On a renegade son of Methodism—the boy anti-Christ of the backwoods—these impertinent antics fell not unpleasingly. Jake enjoyed his participation in the sacrileges, though it cannot be said that he was a complete convert. The suspicion that even Cawdor was half play-acting cooled his enthusiasm. He did not mention the Black Mass to the Cubby-hole crowd. Bobbie Jeter had a nasty way of inquiring, on Jake's returns from the red house, "Hello, Young Wild West—playing cops and robbers again?" There was no use letting that chucklehead know all your business.

The bunch was taking Jake's excursion into Cawdorism as they had taken his other flights—our pet bull is loose again, more data for the stud book. They kidded him, but they curiously watched him, and curiously they discussed the rumors of what went on at the red house, curiously they demanded of Jake if it was true that Cawdor beat women, if it was true he drank blood and worshiped the devil.

To which Jake was bland; he might laugh, he might deny or affirm, or he might drawl out a yarn which lost none of Cawdor's unhallowed attraction in the telling; but he was bland, for blandness was both protection against ridicule and the conjurer of mystery. He, the iconoclast—this was his air—accepted no man too seriously, but he would get what that man had for him, he would seize experience and munch it dry—any experience!

"D' you see?" he said to Beth. "They may scoff at this fellow, but he's a better man than any of them and, furthermore, he can prove it. That's what gripes them—he can prove it. On any given subject he knows more than they do, at their own business he'd probably be better if he took a whack at it. George Gay sneers at him because he knows, in his heart, Cawdor is the better artist. Barry Merrithew doesn't like him because Cawdor has forgotten more about philology than Barry'll ever know. I don't honestly like the man, myself, but I respect his mind and I'm not going to throw his talents in his teeth. Instead, I'll make use of them."

"He's certainly entertaining enough," agreed Beth. "I rather wish he came around more. I don't mind him. I think he's droll."

It was a fact that Beth got along with Cawdor more successfully than any of their group. She treated him like another Jake, a bad urchin to be petted or spanked, and Cawdor gave her a defer-

ence he reserved for no other woman. They were astonishingly agreeable.

"You are Psyche," he told her. "You are the soul. Even Lucifer recognizes and respects that which is greater than heaven or hell." And to Jake, "My friend, the gods who denied you a soul have given you a woman. Without her you are nothing—you will die some day, suddenly, as a leaf shrivels in fire. That will be the day she leaves you."

"Are you planning to leave me, Miss Beth? You know, Cawdor, she has a standing offer to elope with Ronnie Jeter. By god, I refuse to resign my sweet soul to a church-going civil engineer!"

Beth laughed at both of them.

"Watch out, you two—always chunkin' snowballs at God. Some day He'll chunk a big rock right back!"

"The Holy Ghost will get you if you don't—watch—out! I'll take a chance," said Jake.

Privately he confessed to Beth a growing weariness with Cawdor. The fellow's constant pose of omnipotence grated. But Cawdor was a means, Cawdor was writing a book and he, Jake, was going to illustrate it.

"You wait, Beth—this is really something! Before we get done, I'll either be famous or lynched."

"Swell, darling! I love to see you interested in painting again, Jiggs."

"Oh, this isn't painting. Black and white, but like nothing I ever did. You wait. . . ."

The book was the first English translation of the most notorious manuscript left by the notorious Marquis de Sade, and the completion of it, Jake discovered, was Cawdor's chief obsession, his high task in life up to now. Ironic—thought Jake—should Cawdor's only heel-mark on posterity be driven by the foot of another man, yet Cawdor obviously regarded the business as a mission, he was sadism's evangel to the western world, a John the Baptist infernally appointed to cry his bloody christ to bound and puritan Judea.

Early in their relations, Jake had come upon the ten black, fat volumes in Cawdor's bookcase and spelled out in his sparse French the thread of their unnatural text . . . "Justine, or the Woes of Virtue" . . . So this was the christening font of Miss Sarah Pardee; he turned the pages. . . . "Juliette, or the Rewards of Vice" . . . He laughed. An engraving stopped him, fascinated.

"What's this stuff, Cawdor?"

"That, my friend? You stumble instinctively on the omphalos. That is a little thing dashed off by a great man—"

"I know—de Sade, the fellow who invented sadism. He ate a virgin for breakfast every morning, I believe."

Cawdor smiled.

"You wrong him. The Marquis was accused of but two crimes—he delicately whipped a lady, and he put Spanish Fly in some bonbons at a party.

The Marquis was the victim of politics and his mother-in-law. But the man wrote—ah, how the man wrote!"

Cawdor approached the bookcase. From a large box next the ten black, fat volumes he took a sheaf of script and began to read aloud. The passage was the description of M. Rodin's school, with its hundred boys and hundred girls, and Jake listened at first tickled and finally nearer shocked than he had ever been in his life.

"Have you more of that stuff in English?"

"I have translated all but two volumes," said Cawdor placidly.

Thereafter, for a time, Jake devoted himself to literature, with reactions ranging from alternate boredom to emotions uncaptured since, when a small boy, he had stolen "A Night in a Moorish Harem" from a nigger on a river packet. He had been torn, then, between fearful conviction of sin and consuming desire. And now, although the adventures of the two sisters all but drugged him with the sheer piling up of depravity after depravity, and although he skipped hunks of dull writing between the tortures and the lecheries, he knew a queer sense of guilt as when he read the account of Juliette's goings-on with the Pope under the dome of St. Peter's—the God who suffered insolence from a box car might yet strike in Washington Square—and he knew, too, with drool at his lips

and water in his knees, the yearn to emulate, to cut and lash, to stare at writhing muscles, to watch pain livid in the body's white satin, to be Minski the Muscovite, eater of human flesh, to be de Bressac, the matricide, to be a monster among the monsters.

So, on an afternoon when daffodils swayed by the fence rows and April blew the throb of beauty into the room where Jake read and Cawdor muttered above his inkpot, the suggestion was made that sent Jake back to the cardboard and pencil of his *Courier* days.

"And that, kiddies, is how Little Peter Rabbit learned to play murder-wurder." Jake put Cawdor's manuscript in the box, he yawned, took down a volume of the French edition of "Justine" and flipped the pages. "By gee, Cawdor, the Marquis may have slung a nasty pen, but his illustrator certainly didn't. Have you ever seen anything worse than this stuff?"

Cawdor did not look up.

"Could you do better?"

"Hell, I could draw rings around the guy that did this. His women are all swooning lilies or they're old bags. I could do a flagellation that wouldn't look like Queen Victoria playing horse. Shucks, any artist with a subject like de Sade" . . . He broke off, staring at the back of Cawdor's paunchy neck. "Say, who's going to do the illustrations for your book—if any?"

The neck did not stir.

"You are, my friend. Did you not know that weeks ago? I did."

Omnipotence again. Jake scowled.

"Clever of you. I suppose you're snickering because you think I couldn't. By god, if I had a model who'd stand for it, I'd show you!"

Cawdor slowly turned. His eyes focussed on Jake in two parallel lines, the parallel lines circled like fingers pointing to the head of Justine, who sat in the sunshine near the open window, darning Cawdor's socks. He could have said no more with many words.

Jake shrugged.

"No doubt. . . . And you'd have a fine time tearing them to pieces. No thanks, I won't attempt it."

But he did. He completed a drawing of the six monks of Sainte-Marie-des-Bois reveling in their subterranean monastery which even Cawdor grunted was good. He began another. This was to be the celebrated scene in the castle of the demon Roland where, among the corpses and canonicals of the dungeon, the dreadful ghoul forces Justine to submit to the *jeu de coupe-corde*. For this effect Jake used the services of Sarah Pardee. Cawdor bound her naked to his easel so that she seemed to be hanging by the neck from a rope hitched to the ceiling, an extremely difficult position which the

girl uncomplainingly maintained while Jake sketched and Cawdor, apparently oblivious to artist and model, worked on his translation.

An hour passed. For a time the duet of pencil and eraser had been continual, but the sounds slackened, the pauses became longer, Jake's eyes wavered, his right hand nervously traced little figures at one side of his drawing. He was doing nothing except stare over the top of the board at the taut body against the easel, when awareness pierced him, as through a white shell, that Cawdor had stopped writing and had turned around and was looking at him. How long had Cawdor been looking at him like that? . . . looking at him, smiling, his eyes yellow to the lids.

Jake shoved back his chair.

"She has fainted," said Cawdor, and went to the easel and cut the ropes. He slapped the girl, who shuddered and put her hands to her neck. "Lie down, you are a little tired."

Cawdor stood above the drawing-board, rubbing his palms together, still smiling that brittle smile. Suddenly he burst into a roar of laughter.

"What is that—that?"

Down the side of the sketch dribbled the little figures—dogs, fleas, oddly human and grotesque, jumping the years from Gerry Jericho's Jabber of Society to a red house in Washington Square.

Jake, who had not moved again, said, "If you

want to know, they are dogs and fleas. The dog is a masochistic dog and the flea is a sadist. The flea's name is Bellerophon Cawdor."

But Cawdor continued to roar.

"You have missed your destiny, my friend—you should be a comic artist!"

Jake got up heavily. He resisted an impulse to hit Cawdor—if this was insult, he did not care; if this was the scoff of jealousy, he did not care; he was tired, iron dragged his limbs. He bundled up his stuff, materials and drawings; he went home; he did no more illustrations for the Woes of Virtue. After that, until Cawdor had left New York, he did not see Cawdor much, or Justine. But he remembered them . . . Cawdor always . . . Justine's body taut and white against the easel. . . .

XIII

Ronnie Jeter sat uncomfortably on the edge of the gold couch, rolling a cigarette with Bull Durham tobacco and explaining how they catch fish in Bermuda. He was uncomfortable because he could never sit on the gold couch without remembering "the couch of guilt" and wondering, without the complete courage or innocence to ask, exactly why they called it that. He usually took a chair, but Beth had been sitting on the couch until a moment before and he always sat by Beth, if possible. He was rolling his own cigarettes because, when he was a young engineer, he had rolled his own and Ronnie was a man who revered tradition.

As for the fish—"Mark me," Ronnie was saying, "they would laugh at you if you took a rod and reel. I mean it's all handlines. You go out in this flat-bottomed row-boat with the handlines and a box of bait—stale lobster—and a bucket with a glass bottom. Once you're anchored, you begin searching the ocean floor with the glass bucket. I mean you stick the bucket over the side until the glass bottom's under water but the top is out. Then

you stick your head in the bucket and look. The water's very clear there, you know. You can see everything through the bottom of the bucket."

Jake gnawed a bone silently. He had heard nothing Ronnie said since "Mark me"—an expression which, in Ronnie's mouth, he detested. You would sooner expect an archbishop to say, "Whoops!" Yet Ronnie said it with such emphasis: you knew at once he had borrowed it and that he considered it gave his conversation color—"mark me" was at once his passport into bohemia and his defense against glib-talking bohemians. . . . "Mark me, mark me." . . . The words clawed in Jake's head. . . .

". . . Then you choose your fish. If some little fellow is after your bait, you pull it away from him and drag it over towards a big fellow. A porgy or an angel fish or a gray snapper. They've got lots of gray snappers. Mark me, you're looking through the glass bucket all the time. . . ."

Jake got up and yelled to Beth was there any more gravy while Ronnie waited politely, eyeing in the middle of the floor the dish with its mess of hominy and torn steak. Jake knew Ronnie was eyeing the dish, loathing the mess, wondering why any man would eat dinner on the floor—and with his fingers!—wondering whether Jake really was crazy, hating Jake and wishing Jake was dead or something.

"In the pan, honey—plenty of it!"

Jake grinned and, sucking his fingers loudly, went to the kitchenette.

It was horrible, thought Ronnie, horrible that she had to live with a man like that. He had never understood it; probably—he sighed—he never would understand. But it was horrible just the same. He wished she would finish dressing quickly so he could take her away; if she would only come quickly from the other room he could take her away at once to some quiet uptown place—the old Park Avenue Hotel, with the patio and the fountain—and he could tell her how they catch fish in Bermuda and she would be enthusiastic and glad.

"So you see," he said to Jake, "you wait until you actually *see* your fish nibble the bait and then you hook him. A quick jerk and a long pull—that's it! I mean it's very interesting because you stalk the fish like you would stalk an animal. Through the glass-bottomed bucket, you know."

Jake had returned to his squatting posture and was swabbing up the gravy with a hunk of cornbread.

"Have a bite, Ronnie?" he suggested.

"No thank you. . . . I'm taking Beth to dinner, you know."

"Sure. . . . Just thought you might like an appetizer."

There was silence. Jake chuckled into the gravy and Ronnie smoked, not in pique as Jake suspected, but a little sadly, wishing that people were more

interested in fishing, and trying to think of something acceptable to talk about to his host.

"Seen that chap Cawdor lately?"

"Cawdor? My god, no! Nobody's seen him. He's gone."

"Oh," said Ronnie, "I didn't know."

He might have asked where Cawdor had gone, but he didn't honestly care, he was only being agreeable, and the subject evidently was one of those dead ones he was always hitting on. . . . Cawdor. . . . Another fellow he could never understand, yet he had tried to talk to Cawdor, even, because Beth seemed to like the fellow and anyone Beth liked . . . well, the queen can do no wrong. There were times, he confessed, when he didn't understand Beth, but Beth understood him and that, in this insane world, was what comforted and inspired.

"Er—have you—" labored Ronnie, still under his guest's obligation to talk, but, to their mutual relief, Beth emerged, lovely in something shimmering and green. At sight of Jake, she made a gesture of despair.

"Oh, Jiggs darling, why must you do that? All over the rug probably!"

"Jakey want to. . . . Jakey like food Miss Beth fix for him. . . ."

Ronnie had risen swiftly, almost a convulsion in the arms ready to hold her coat, but now he turned away, fumbling for a cigarette paper, for here it

was again, the thing he could not understand, in the way she could look down like an exasperated yet amused nurse at this dundering monkey on the floor with his licked dish and his revolting baby-talk.

"Give Jakey kiss?"

She leaned over while Ronnie averted his gaze.

". . . big old crazy!" Their eyes laughed, for she knew, and Jake knew that she knew, he had eaten on the floor principally to annoy Ronnie.

"Poor Ronnie!" Beth patted his expectant arm. "Did I keep him waiting long?"

"Not a bit! But I have got a taxi downstairs—"

"You have? Merciful heavens! Why didn't you say so? 'Bye, Jiggs—be a good boy." Their voices dwindled, Beth's still gay, Ronnie's suddenly exuberant. "And how was Bermuda?"—"Say, I must tell you—"

Jake eased onto his back and grunted at the ceiling. Fish for Beth all the way uptown, and then verbal corned beef and cabbage. How on earth did she stand it? Well, it was no business of his. Maybe Ronald Jeter had his points, but they were certainly well muffled. Imagine an entire evening in Ronnie's society! Which brings up the point: what am I going to do this evening?

The ceiling stretched blankly white except for a wavering crack, and the prospect for Jake—he told himself—stretched just as empty. He could not remember when life offered less amusement

than it had lately. No more red house, no more Cawdor, and he wasn't sorry. No more Cubbyhole crowd since he had deserted them for darker games, and he wasn't sorry for that, either. No woman that interested him at the moment. No new intriguing encounters. Well, he could read, or he could go to a movie, or he could take a walk. . . . He continued to stare at the ceiling. . . . Of course, he could do some work. That wasn't a bad idea. He had been doing a little work lately, magazine covers and illustrations that he intended to show editors. Money didn't last forever, and for the last six months Beth had had to call on papa. Old Man Wimbish had come through, but he had grumbled —just a little bit nasty, Old Man Wimbish. A pity he didn't die. Then Jake would never have to work. . . .

Jake got up, took the dish to the kitchenette and sank it with the unwashed pan, removed his coat and shoes, put on an old sweater, picked up an unfinished sketch and laid it down again, padded to the bathroom, padded back to the kitchenette, poured a tumbler of gin, drank it slowly, gazed distantly at the unfinished sketch, thumbed a book, looked for cigarettes, found none, cursed—"oom pa dam, oom pa dam, good god dam, oom pa dam" —put on his moccasins, took another drink and shuffled out.

On his way back from the corner cigar store, he decided to look into the Cubbyhole. The bunch was

changing, breaking up, Mollie Mills had married a fellow out West, Bobbie Jeter had gone abroad, new faces desecrated the temple—students, out-of-towners—Wanda actually was making a little money. But maybe Ben Safford would be there; he would like to see old Ben; some scurrilous me-talk would be good after Ronnie Jeter.

Electric lights, which had replaced the Chianti bottles, threw their sordid commercial gleams on a basement prosperous with diners. They were strangers to Jake, Ben Safford was not among them, and, after standing by the door for a minute, he was about to go, when his name was shouted from a far corner. A big party around that table. Drinking, too. Blandly selfconscious, Jake padded over.

The Cantrells were entertaining some of their weird friends. They looked like Bob's advertising confrères, or Helen's prides of the South whom she still acknowledged on their periodic visits North. Jake, aware of the Cantrells' impulse to parade a Villager and regretting his own impulse that had led him to such goofy people, yet paused in his moccasins to salute the men and kiss the ladies' hands.

". . . and you remember S'lina Marr, don't you? She used to live in Corinth. Sit down and have a drink, Jiggs."

Not immediately did Jake recognize the profile several heads away as one he had seen before, and

not until he had had a number of drinks did the repeated name of Santolina Marr strike a wire coiled deep. . . . Santolina. . . . Santolina. . . . It is sunset and they are playing Puccini. This is somewhere in the country. It is years ago, before the war. A tall, dark woman in a white dress comes out. She frowns arrogantly. You think: she is handsome. . . .

But this woman is not handsome! She is sallow and her neck is not good. You like the red turban and the red lips of the same shade, she is dressed better than these other women, but why did you think her handsome? Her teeth, when she smiles, are like little white sabres, her breasts are still high. Yet something has gone. Forty—would you say? You are tall, you are arrogant, you are thirty. She is old. . . .

Santolina Marr threw back her head and blew cigarette smoke at the ceiling. Hard in the electric glare, the corner of her mouth curled, and Jake put down his glass. An ancient wound cracked, a scar cried out for redress. . . . I would have bound you, I would have throttled you, I would have lashed and kissed that subdued, lovely body . . . old woman!

They were drinking corn whisky which some one named Jim had brought—"Honey, I just naturally cain' drink this New Yawk booze, looky heah, honey, I just naturally cain' drink it"—and they were all a little tipsy and very gay. It was

easy, after his fourth drink, to swap seats with Don Cantrell.

"You don't remember me?"

The flicker in the sooty eyes obviously was not one of remembrance, but, after all, why should great ladies remember callow boors in beards?

"I'm afraid I don't."

Jake grinned, content that it was so. And all the time, too, he was trying to remember. What was it —afterward, long afterward? Everyone was talking about it, one night at West Lake, only there was nothing in the newspapers and the women had whispered. A divorce or a family row of some sort; she had been married to a doctor, hadn't she? Yet there had been something else, something queer, the sort of scandal Corinth retreated from, puzzled, afraid. And Santolina Marr had gone away and no one saw her or even talked about her any more. . . .

"You have been abroad?" He was thinking out loud.

"Paris. . . . Living there the last five years."

"And why are you here—with these people?"

He said it so seriously, goggling at her out of the turtleneck of his sweater, that she bridled.

"Why shouldn't I be here—with these people? Aren't you a little stupid?"

"I'm not drunk, if that is what you mean. I think you are bored and angry with them and angry with yourself for being angry. I think you are

here because you are afraid of them, or because you are simply too indifferent to care where you are. You are a cardinal among sparrows."

"What remarkable analysis! You deduced this all by yourself?"

"All by myself." Jake refused to wriggle. "Once, long ago, I saw you and you were like a lady on horseback. The charger has galloped away. You ride him no more. Why?"

Santolina Marr burst into laughter. Her lips were so red, her teeth so white in her dark face. "I am a bird! I am a horse! What does the man want? Do you keep a zoo?"

Jake leaned forward. Noise went on around them. "You know what I want. You know what I am saying makes sense. Let us leave here."

She turned on him the most dispassionate of scrutinies. "You aren't very drunk. You aren't stupid. I suppose you are merely a conceited ass."

"Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," replied Jake. "We will go a little later then."

Abruptly, he began asking her about Paris. She answered composedly; if she were in the least offended—said her manner—this stranger in the clothes of a hoodlum was not to know it. . . . Talk to me, if you wish, of Paris, of art, of music; I appreciate these things; you are a man who says he knew me once and, apparently, you are a person of intelligence despite your looks. . . . And Jake talked his Cawdor's best, ignoring the others, con-

centrating on this lady who had lost youth yet retained a sharper goad, trying vainly to estimate his chances for consummating a passion that had started as a whim. He did not know, while he talked, whether she held him a gentleman or a mucker. He did not know, when she rose all at once, whether he would ever see her again. Because he was obstinate, he said, "I'll get you a taxi," as she insisted to the party that she must leave them, but he was more surprised than gratified when she nodded and answered, "Thank you."

"Good night," she said on the sidewalk.

Jake, bareheaded under the arclight, shook his head.

"I'm going with you."

"In those?" Her shrug included moccasins and sweater. "You'll catch cold, I'm afraid."

"Get in," said Jake. He touched her arm—the last bluff.

The next instant his pulses leaped—she had given the address to the driver and stepped into the cab; the door stood open. Jake sprang in. . . .

Santolina Marr lay against him in the dark. He had enfolded her, gingerly, then violently, and she had not resisted. No word. No check. She lay against him, breast to his breast, and he kissed her. Kissed the invisible, perfumed flesh. Kissed the cheek and mouth and throat, his mouth and his hands seeking, provoking with all their skill. . . . Old woman, I hold your body, I range and incite

your body. Your body is young and tawny, old woman, it is smooth and your hair is black, and you are on fire for me, you who insulted me, you are mine to insult, you who humiliated me I will grind down and conquer and lash with the whips of my desire. . . .

The lips he kissed moved unexpectedly aside, cool fingers pushed his chin, Santolina Marr sat up.

"That's quite enough. You're an impetuous young man, but you are rather amusing. Is it a custom in the Village to treat all visitors like the Sabine women?"

Jake's hands were still fumbling, refusing to believe the message of his stunned brain.

"Please, little boy—I said that was enough. Sit up and be sensible."

So Jake, too, sat up. He was utterly dumbfounded and outraged. The douche to his fervor had been sufficiently chilling, but the stroke to his vanity was devastating. Whatever the delusion of an instant before, he was old hand enough to appreciate that the woman on the seat beside him had no more desire for his caresses than she had for an oyster's. He was not sure, now, that her lips had so much as moved. The submissive body now was inflexibly erect, she swung her foot from her knee, she was actually humming, and, unless the whole world was cock-eyed, the tune was "Yankee Doodle."

Well, by the tongue of Aphrodite, he was no

college boy to neck a snow image in a taxicab, particularly an image that hummed "Yankee Doodle" while he panted!

The cab lurched around a corner, and Jake hung on to his side. Lust reclaimed him, but he hung on.

"Do you know, I think you are right," Santolina Marr was saying, "they are dull people. I used to think Helen Cantrell was an unusual girl, but she struck me to-night as peculiarly inane. I wonder if New York doesn't do that to people? They cluck and crow about their trivial affairs just like the people in Corinth do. Only they are worse here because they are so sublimely unconscious of their provincialism. I don't believe I care for New York—"

"New York's the only city in the world." He began to defend New York, violently, angrily—like a schoolboy, like a Rotarian, he could not stop, he must even defend the horrible Cantrells, and all the while his lust grew, and his anger, and his suspicion that she was smiling in the dark.

So the cab swung east from Fifth Avenue, bumped across Madison, and drew up before a marquee. Jake got out and helped his companion out while a uniformed flunkey held the door.

Santolina Marr regarded him quizzically. The red turban perked to one side like a bird's head.

"Won't you come up and have a drink?" she cooed, and her eyes mocked him.

Had it not been for the flunkey, Jake would have mumbled regrets and surrendered the victory. But the flunkey's gaze on his sweater was not to be borne. "Fine!" he retorted, paid the driver, and stalked after her with every slap of his moccasins a curse at the proletariat. . . .

This, Jakey, is a damn fool thing you are doing. You are not in the Village, you are in the East Fifties, where moccasins and sweaters are misunderstood. You are in one of those smart apartment hotels. They arrest people here for looking like burglars. And you do not want this drink. You do not want this woman, smiling inexplicably as the elevator ascends. She is old and cold and intent only on baiting you and humiliating you. Go back to the Village, Jakey, go back to the women who understand you and love you and warm your bed with youth. . . . What? That is why you want her—because she is cold and inexplicable? Go on, then, you were ever a mule for stubbornness, and you may get her yet, Jakey. . . .

He thought, as he entered: a prosy setting for seduction, like a million other decorator's flats. Expensive but ordinary. The woman probably is like that, too. You are a fool, Jakey—she isn't worth the sweat. . . . But, after Santolina Marr disappeared into the next room, he prowled restlessly, pawing her undistinguished possessions, and when she returned, he had picked up a riding crop and was beating a nervous tattoo against the arm of his

chair. The chink of ice made him turn, and he sucked in his breath.

Santolina Marr had changed to a negligee that would have been a challenge to St. Anthony. It was bright scarlet, black lace accented her breasts, the stuff clung to her like tape, and where the little feet in black slippers kicked out the amorous folds, the flash of silk and flesh fairly implored his pursuit.

She advanced across the room holding a tray with glasses and a decanter and a syphon.

"Scotch—?"

Without a word he took the drink. . . . Why don't you thank her, Jakey? Cat got your tongue, little boy? Or is it passion, or is it funk? A lady disrobes, and passion straps your tongue. Deliberately she entices that she may repulse, and cowardice blocks your throat. You are a little bewildered, aren't you, Jakey? and honing for her, as the niggers used to say, and afraid of her and hating her, too. Are you going to "take a dare," Jakey? . . . Well, we will sit and talk, and I will have another drink. . . . We talk about this and that, and that and this, and I do not know what I am saying. It does not matter what I am saying, I know what I am doing, I am changing my seat, I am close to her. I am on the couch beside her where I can see the flecks in her eyes and the tiny blue vein in her arm, where I feel her heat, where I smell her. . . . See, I can touch her hand and she does not mind. I can stroke the blue vein. I can lift the arm and run

my lips along it, so . . . and so . . . and so. . . . She is trembling, I think; she is trembling with desire. . . . Back with you, old woman! I am master . . . master! . . .

His cheek stung twice before he realized these were blows. She struck him again.

"Get out of here," said Santolina Marr, "get out of here!"

She said it quietly. Only the balled fists and the repugnance in her face were emotional.

Jake had released her, drawing back with temples pounding.

"Damn you!" he blurted. "What are you trying to do to me? What kind of a game is this?"

Santolina Marr began to laugh. She got up, screaming with laughter. She pointed her finger at him.

"Oh, you are such a fool—such a stupid, clumsy fool! I talked to you because I was bored and I thought you would amuse me, you were so funny looking. You did amuse me. You are very, very funny. But your love-making—pah! Why do American men make love as though the woman was a statue? A statue to be scoured by the janitor! Get out of here, clumsy little boy, I am bored with your love-making!"

Jake picked up the riding crop and cut her across the face.

He was on his feet, and he cut her again as she flinched.

Red mist was in his eyes. Through it he saw the woman slumping to the floor. She seemed to be crawling toward him, her arms groping for his knees, and he lifted the riding crop and brought it down, and up and down, on her back.

. . . I am beating you, old woman, I am beating you. Even Cawdor never beat a woman better than I am beating you. . . .

Then her face was rising beneath him in the red mist, but what he saw in the face was not pain.

Jake threw the riding crop away. Her lips met his, tearing. He had never been so astonished in his life.

"Come on up, Ronnie, come on up and have a drink—won't you?" said Beth. They stood on the sidewalk in Eleventh Street, a quiet, lovely street at midnight. The trees made lovely shadows, there was a moon, and the footfalls of infrequent pedestrians sounded like the clop-clop of horses' hooves heard on lonely, romantic nights in Bermuda.

Ronnie would have liked to go up, but he shook his head.

"No, I guess not. I guess you're tired, Beth."

"Oh no I'm not! It's been a lovely evening, Ronnie."

"Thanks. I thought it was swell."

"You're sweet, Ronnie. . . . Call me soon, won't you?"

"You bet I will."

They shook hands. Ronnie stood for a moment, staring at the night. She was in there, now, with that fellow. Now she had kissed him.

But Beth had entered an empty room.

"Jiggs!" she cried. There was no answer. She sighed as she went about straightening things before she undressed.

XIV

SUNSHINE WAS IN THE ROOM WHEN BETH AWOKE. She stirred just enough to open one eye and, beyond the horizon of her bed, regard its twin. She sat up immediately. The other bed, neat and white, was as she had last seen it.

There is, for those not used to solitude, a pang in its sudden descent. The reaction may be serene, even joyous, but to wake, expecting the familiar, and to find the familiar gone, is like reaching a hand into the dark for the door that has become the abyss.

Beth, propped on her elbows, called. There was no answer; the sunshine poured into the hush. She sank back, depressed, but glad of her pillow. Jake had not come home—well, that was that, several times before he had stayed out all night with no dire consequences. She hoped he had not been killed or run over or arrested. None of these things had ever happened to Jake, but always she must be mindful of them even while she wondered how drunk he had gotten and where he was sleeping it off. After while he would telephone, or there

would be a message, possibly in a woman's voice, and in the meantime she had better see if there was plenty of aspirin and triple bromides.

Beth lay on her spine with her legs and arms outstretched, and thought about Ronnie. She was going to have to do something about Ronnie. If only he were not so doglike, so implicitly faithful and adoring. She could endure his tedious conversation and worshipful trances, his Bull Durham and his tenacious propriety, for the sake of that quality in him for which she had no other word than sweet. After all, it was sweet to be adored. Her dog in Corinth had adored her, and, until Ronnie, she had known no other love like that. But Ronnie was not a dog, he was a man, very much of a man in his old-fashioned way, and he should laugh like a man, and swear like a man, and break things like a man once in a while. Even "Snooks," who loved her, had chewed her arm.

Lately, it had seemed to her, Ronnie was getting worse. Gloomier. Moodier. He would be forever dumbly mourning at her if she didn't rally him with questions about gray snappers and things like that. She could sense another of those distressing crises coming along. . . . "Please don't talk that way," she had commanded him. "I won't listen to things against Jiggs, and, anyhow, suppose I don't love him? I wouldn't marry you if I were free. I don't like to hurt you, Ronnie, but you hurt me." In-

coherent with remorse, he had apologized, but there he was again, wagging for kindness, and when he got it, going moony and unhappy again and working himself up to the same forlorn appeal. She didn't like it. Uncomfortable having Ronnie around —like a sin reproaching her. She must do something. Yet, she reflected, she would miss Ronnie.

Tiny chimes from the sitting-room spurred her from bed. She was aghast that it was nine o'clock. Breakfast to get and work to do, dusting, sweeping, marketing, and the laundry boy was coming and the iceman. The Perrys had only a part-time maid now, and her but three times a week. But Beth rather enjoyed cleaning her own house and frying her own chicken after a procession of "Yankee niggers." Besides, housekeeping kept her busy, and, somehow, to be busy was becoming more and more difficult and desirable as the years marched.

At eleven o'clock, suddenly frowning, Beth put down her dust-rag and went to the telephone. She called a number and asked for Jake. She called other numbers with the same question and the same result. Finally, chatting cautiously with Wanda, she learned of Jake's presence in the Cubbyhole the night before. She telephoned Helen Cantrell.

"I can't find him," she confessed. "Did he go home with you folks?"

Helen wasted no effort on tact. "Nobody saw him after he went out with Santolina Marr—to get

her a taxi, he said. You remember S'lina, don't you?"

"Oh, yes!" Beth's voice was bright. "So she's back from Europe? How nice!"

But she avoided asking where Santolina was stopping, and though she hummed cheerfully as she renewed her dusting, she called no more numbers and, once, sat down on a heap of lint and frowned at nothing. . . . What was it? Long ago in Corinth . . . something queer. . . .

Resolutely, at two o'clock, she went out and did her marketing. She even strolled through Washington Square and into the Italian quarter, where she bought broccoli off a pushcart. Jake liked broccoli, with lots of garlic. It was after three when she returned home, trying not to hurry on the stairs. She closed the door . . . "Jiggs?" . . . The apartment was empty.

Beth did not go out again. She sorted the contents of a bureau drawer, she played three games of solitaire, she read a book, "The Happy Hypocrite." At five, Ronnie telephoned. Could he drop by? No—there were people coming. She was in no mood for Ronnie. His good-bye was desolate.

Twilight fell at seven. Beth had stopped trying to read. She drew her chair close to the window and it seemed to her she had been huddled there, staring into the dark, for ages, when at eight o'clock the doorbell rang.

The man who came up the stairs was swarthy

and poorly dressed. He stood in the hall, blinking at the sudden flare of light.

"You Meez Paree?"

She took the scrap of paper he extended and read it swiftly: "Come get me. Bring shoes. Urgent!!!"

The scrawl, in pencil, was indubitably Jake's to the very exclamation points.

"The man who wrote this—where is he?"

"He in 'part-ment house where I work. He in Meez Marr kitch' when I tek gar-badge. He poosh me out queek, geeve dollar and say bring to you. He say you geeve dollar, too, when I bring."

"Was he hurt?"

A brilliant smile illumined the courier's face. He shook his head violently.

"He no hurt—he naked!"

Beth bestowed the dollar. At some difficulty to understand, but at pains to get it right, she wrote down the address. Then, having dismissed the courier, she lost no time. Only once did she pause. . . . "Bring shoes" . . . The instruction was incomprehensible, but she wrapped a pair of Jake's shoes in a neat parcel which she carried under her arm.

At the desk in the lobby of the Royston Arms they would have announced her had not Beth's smile been so assured.

"Don't bother, please—I'm expected."

The elevator boy pointed out Mrs. Marr's door.

Not till then, as she knocked, did Beth falter. Her chin was trembling. After all, she had no clear notion of what to expect.

Sounds on the other side of the door. Whoever approached walked in a succession of soft bumps. The door opened a crack to reveal Jake's face only. It was gaunt and unshaved, but at sight of Beth it broke into a wan grin. "Come in, honey," he whispered politely, and added in the same tone, "Thank God!"

Beth walked in and looked at her husband. The courier's description had been exact.

Said a voice beyond a screen: "Darling, who is it?"

"It's my wife," responded Jake. "Now, you bitch, give me my clothes."

Santolina Marr, in a silk wrapper, sauntered from behind the screen.

"Please, darling, stop calling me a—"

She stopped with a gasp.

"Hello, Santolina," said Beth. "If you're quite through with my husband, I'll take him away."

Beth was smiling pleasantly, Santolina was dead white under two livid welts that furrowed her cheek, Jake stuck out his lower lip at Santolina and wheeled around confidently to Beth. He looks, thought Beth, scared. Perfectly sober, perfectly whole, but scared. Scared and exhausted.

"She took my clothes away," said Jake plaintively. "She locked them up and hid the key. She

cut the telephone. I couldn't walk out this way. I couldn't do anything. . . . Where are my clothes, bitch?"

Santolina Marr spoke.

"My God, is he your husband? I didn't even know his name! Honest I didn't, Beth. . . . Well, I guess this is *tout est bien fini.* I'll get your clothes, darling."

They waited, Beth with her head up, her smile fixed, Jake glowering at his bare feet.

"Did you bring the shoes?"

"Here they are. Didn't you wear any shoes?"

"Moccasins. She threw them out the window."

"I see," said Beth. But she didn't—yet.

Santolina returned. All three were a little embarrassed as Jake struggled into his pants, but he made haste, it was soon over.

"Good-bye, Beth," said Santolina. "I'm sorry."

She had turned slightly and where the silk hugged one shoulder-blade, Beth saw the dark stains. She remembered then. What Corinth could not understand. There had been talk among Dr. Marr's friends of action outside the law, but the chauffeur had quit town—on Santolina's money, they whispered—and Santolina had dared them to prosecute the man. That was why it had been so queer . . . that she should love him . . . after he had beaten her. Suddenly Corinth, to Beth, seemed very far away and its people, and herself then, very innocent.

"It's quite all right, S'lina," she declared. She hesitated, almost compassionate.

"Don't worry," said Santolina. "I'm sailing for Paris to-morrow."

Jake grunted. He kicked something near his feet. It was a riding crop and, as it slid across the floor, it left freckles of red.

"Let's go," said Jake.

In the taxicab he lurched about like a drunken man.

"Do you want to explain?"

"No. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about anything. I'm dead beat."

"Jiggs"—she spoke slowly—"are you trying to copycat after Bellerophon Cawdor?"

His grin was weak, but his spirit was valiant. "I'm me. I'm myself. I don't copy anybody. I'll confess"—he grinned again—"I bit off more than I could chew this time, Miss Beth."

Beth said no more. She looked out the window while he nodded and, home at last, silently helped him up the stairs. . . . "You were a peach, Miss Beth," he mumbled . . . "old peach." . . . Sixty seconds after he touched the bed, he was snoring like a hog.

Jake slept for eighteen hours. When he woke, he did not move for some time. He felt, except that his head was clear and the lassitude in his sinews pleasant, exactly as he had after eating hasheesh

once. His brain smoked with wisps of a crazy dream which gradually condensed into specific forms. That had happened. And that. And that. These things had actually happened, the mad, the berserk, the exhausting and infuriating, and now that he could contemplate them in the languor of his own castle, now that the incredible resolved to fact, a twinkle warmed his eye, he rubbed his nose, his lips twitched, and he got out of bed with the lazy little glow common to all conquistadors at such a moment. The Indians had been met and mastered, and though it was true that the fighting had waxed hectic to the point where the militia was welcome, still it was good to cherish the scalps of victory.

In the next room he could hear Beth moving about, and he called to her, as he went to the bath, to ask if he could have coffee. Soon its aroma reached him where he shaved, stimulating appetite and mind. Beth was a wonder, wasn't she? She certainly had gotten him out of a fix. For a while, there, he was about to go nuts. That damn woman! —Just as well if, as she said, she was sailing for Europe. Good-bye, old woman! Yet you opened my eyes to a few things. *Merci beaucoup.* And, under the shower, he sang a bit. . . . "Aroving, aroving, we'll go no more aro-o-ving!" . . .

Breakfast tasted delicious. He ate in the sitting-room where Beth, whom he had kissed grateful good-morning, was busy at something near the closet. He had skimmed the morning paper and

consumed two pieces of toast before it came to him what she was doing.

Then he said: "What in the world are you doing, honey?"

She straightened above the suit-case, looked at Jake, and crossed to the chair opposite him. Come to think of it, he thought, she has been silent.

"I'm unpacking my bag. I packed it early this morning, when I first got up, and I was going to send for the rest of my things. But I've changed my mind. I've decided not to leave you, Jiggs. I don't know exactly why I'm not. But I'm not."

Her gaze was steady, his genuinely stricken.

"You were going to leave me?"

"Yes. It hadn't occurred to you that I might? Well, I don't suppose that's so extraordinary, I haven't given you any warning, have I? And it is a rather childish thing to do after—everything. Only sometimes, Jiggs, I get a little disgusted with myself. I seem to be of so little use in your life."

"No use? . . . Beth, I'd be lost without you."

"Yes, I suppose that's true." She inspected him calmly. "In fact, that's one thing I've been telling myself. You do need me. And that saves my self-respect somewhat. It gives me a sort of an alibi."

"Alibi?"

The color was high in her cheeks, light in her candid eyes. "A woman doesn't stick to a man except for one reason, Jiggs. And if she's got any pride, she can't keep on sticking forever if—if—it

isn't that way with him. I know we're supposed to be intelligent and all that, we settled it all long ago, didn't we? Only, sometimes, it won't stay settled. It . . . gets a woman's goat."

This was excruciating. "Look here, Beth—"

"Forgive me, Jiggs, I didn't mean to put you in a hole. I'm not asking you to do the impossible—honest. I'm just trying to look at things squarely, for you as well as me, and it helps a little to talk. I'll be square some more. Another reason I'm not leaving you is because I need you. I got a letter from dad to-day, Jiggs. I guess it was in the box when we came home last night, only I didn't see it."

She took it out of the pocket of her smock, Old Man Wimbish's awkward handwriting on, this time, an envelope of the DeSoto Hotel, Savannah, Georgia. Last week, recalled Jake, it was the stationery of the Seaboard Airline Railway.

"Your papa been away?"

"Don't joke—he's in Corinth, but he must have seen somebody from up here and they told him something. He says, Jiggs, he won't continue my allowance, he won't give me any more money at all, unless I come home."

Jake nibbled toast.

"Well—why don't you pay him a visit?"

"That isn't what he means. He says I've got to come home for good. He's giving me a choice, Jiggs, his support or—you."

"He wants you to quit me?"

"That seems to be the idea."

Crunch, crunch, on the toast.

"Well—why don't you?"

"I've told you why. Besides—give up? Go back to Corinth? I couldn't live in Corinth now. You know that. It would stifle me."

Jake threw the rest of the toast on the tablecloth. He stretched.

"I guess this is where little Jakey has to go to bat. Time enough, too. Don't you worry, Beth honey. I'm free, white and twenty-one, I've got my health and I'm a damn good man when I try to be. By the way, what happened particularly to peeve the old gentleman?"

"Read it." She tossed the letter over with a puckery smile. "He heard, it appears, you were 'courting' other women," and, while she watched him, "Red is a good dad, but he'll stand just so much, you know. I guess it's just as well he wasn't in on last night."

There was not much Jake could say to that—or to the letter. He tossed it back and gripped her hand.

"Don't you worry, chickabiddy. Don't you mind. If your papa can get along without you, I reckon we can get along without him. I'm going up this afternoon to see Don Cantrell. He was telling me about a job with some sort of newspaper outfit. They need an artist. If I can't get that, I'll get

something else. Don't you worry. Jakey fix. Beth don't think Jakey total loss? Beth hate Jakey—no?"

She sighed, her hand squeezing his.

"I think Jakey better hustle and get dressed if he means what he says. Do you mean it, Jiggs?"

He threw his bathrobe on the floor.

"Watch me! . . . Where's my underwear?"

He had heard about this New York job-hunting thing. It was apt to be brutal. You looked up your friends. They had no jobs, but they gave you letters. You saw the friends' friends. They had no jobs. A few gave you more letters and you saw the friends of the friends. When the letters ran out, you died slowly in anterooms while strangers were "in conference." If you captured anyone above an office boy, he treated you with suspicion implying that only crooks were out of jobs and only maniacs expected to walk into them. Romantic to shiver on park benches and shovel snow. But you were an artist, you were a gentleman. Yours the tragedy of job-hunting in the polite manner.

Jake stumped out of the house outwardly as confident as a cossack, and within a mush of apprehension. The future leered forbiddingly. The ghosts of all the panhandlers he had ever met stumped with him, and one of them was a Bowery bum who spat in his palm and grinned, "But, my good man, I don't know you!" Never before had

he recalled save in derision: "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bunyan." He shook himself like a dog coming out of water. He had told Beth—and what a relief to play rooster at that moment!—he would fetch the worm, so dig he must. Banish those fears, then, Jakey—you are a man of destiny!

Under his arm was an old portfolio, and in it were all the drawings he could find, brushed together hastily and promiscuously. He had taken far more pains dressing—"Always look your best in business, the successful man is known by his appearance"—so the sweater and beret drooped on a hook in the Perry pantry; Jake wore a blue serge suit, a stiff collar and a derby.

Fatalistically, he had expected to find Don Cantrell out. But Don was in. Don wanted to talk about the party, to resuscitate the events of a large evening, what mean stuff corn liquor is, how they went to Harlem—

"Look here," said Jake, "I want a job."

Beth and the wraith of a Bowery bum stood behind him. As quickly as possible he escaped with Don's note to Simeon Blum, editor of Colossus Comics, Incorporated.

"What sort of steer is this?" he demanded. "I'm no comic artist."

"You better wish you were." Don seemed a bit indignant. "Those babies make plenty. Why, Jack Duff pulls down a hundred grand a year for Biff

McSwiff and the guy that draws 'Fay On Her Way' gets twice as much as the President of the United States. Comic artist? You haven't a chance! But Colossus puts out all kinds of features for newspapers. Columns and fashions and those wild stories about 'Why Mrs. Astor Kicked the Duke Downstairs'—you've seen 'em. They may have an opening for a retoucher in the art department."

"I see," said Jake.

"And by the way," added Don, "if you see Sim Blum himself, don't get funny about comics. Sim's a great guy, the best feature man in America, but he's serious about humor. He's got elaborate theories on why people laugh. He's awfully touchy on the subject, and the funny part is he's usually right."

"I'll tell him 'Zowie!' is the wittiest epigram since Whistler died," promised Jake.

Like most people, even newspaper men, Jake had the vaguest notion of what a feature syndicate was. All those perennial parts of the daily paper which attract many readers ahead of the news—the sport column, the fiction serial, Eddie Guest's poetry, Beatrice Fairfax's advice, especially the antics of Krazy Kat, Mutt and Jeff, Biff McSwiff and the rest of the "funnies"—he knew, as he knew about condensed milk and Fords, were produced somewhere and simultaneously published in scores of newspapers from coast to

coast. But of the mechanics of their production—or that this phase of newspaper work was an industry in itself—he had never thought twice.

Hence, to discover the Colossus firm occupied three floors of a skyscraper and flew a slogan, "Colossus Comics Cover the Earth," was somewhat daunting. Jake waited in a reception room like a circus tent, observing the slogan and various posters of merry andrews dear to the public. Near him, a life-size dummy of Biff McSwiff seemed about to topple from the concussion of a realistic brick on its left ear. Evidently the brick was from the hand of a lady poised like a Winged Victory at the far end of the room. Jake recognized her instantly as Minnie McSwiff. Almost he spoke.

He was thinking, "I guess this outfit's more important than I thought, a lot of slapsticks and lowbrows, at that; I guess they won't have any use for my stuff," when a boy said, "Mister Blum's in conference—Mr. Mackey will see you."

Mr. Mackey sat at a desk spear-heading a dozen other desks where men in shirtsleeves toiled. Comic artists, assumed Jake, ignorant that these were mere handymen and that the kingpins of Colossus, mailing their strips and pages from villas in California and bungalows in Florida, seldom reached the office from one year's end to the next.

"I'm looking for a position—"

"Samples? Let's see 'em," snapped Mr. Mackey. If this dictator's impenitent youth had not been

ruffling enough, his bark and the way in which he thumbed Jake's artistic endeavors were sufficient to incense their creator, already routed by Colossus grandeur and ripe for an excuse to flee it without too much laceration of self-conceit.

. . . See here, kid, I wouldn't work for your snotty syndicate if you—

"I'm afraid," began Mr. Mackey, pausing indifferently at Jake's half-finished sketch of a nude Justine, "I'm afraid this stuff ain't exactly in our line," when a bellow seemed to blow erect the hairs at the back of Mr. Mackey's head and a hand like a fat chop pounced past Mr. Mackey's ear and yanked the sketch from Mr. Mackey's fingers.

Any Colossus employee could have told Jake that it was a practice of Simeon Blum's, as a tactic in his theory of efficiency, to refer occasional callers to subordinates and then to steal forth and spy on his hirelings' methods in such junctures. Since theories of efficiency depend for existence on the discovery of inefficiency, Mr. Blum's employees frequently experienced shocks similar to Mr. Mackey's, painful to themselves and agreeable, at least temporarily, to the callers. But Jake didn't know Blum from Adam. He saw only a fat man who had rudely snatched one of his drawings and was puffing smoke at it from both tips of a cigar.

"Who did this?" bellowed the fat man, removing cigar from mouth.

"That?—That?" Mr. Mackey's voice creaked.

"Not this crude vulgarity—this naked woman, Mr. Mackey. Who did these curious little creatures I see here?"

"The gentleman, sir."

Jake had been fuming to himself that it was obvious whose sketches Mackey was considering—namely, the person seated at Mackey's elbow—and his resentment against Mackey was all swerving toward the intruder who dubbed his Justine a "crude vulgarity." But now the fat man turned on him a beam like a lighthouse welcoming a ship, and extended his fat chop with the augustness of an ambassador. Jake put an extra ounce of venom into his squeeze.

"These little creatures are yours? They are superb, sir. I am amazed, Mr. Mackey, that you did not immediately recognize their quality. They have an exquisite sense of the whimsical under, sir, what I call the zoömorphic classification in comic art. They are uproariously funny."

Since the fat man had not cracked a smile until now, Jake decided he was either crazy or an exceptionally obnoxious kidder.

"I'll take that sketch, please."

"But no—you must tell me, you must explain your theory of continuity for the adventures of these little creatures. We have here a dog—a child could see in this dog's face the affection and wistfulness so characteristic of dogs, yet so funny, so uproariously funny. And we have here, assuredly,

a flea, a flea with human attributes. What is it I see in this flea's face? Is it anger? Is it repugnance? This object in his hand—?"

Jake got up and looked over the fat man's shoulder, putting a nasty grin as close as he could to the fat man's nose. "The dog is a masochist and the flea a sadist. The flea is whipping the dog because it pleases him to whip the dog. And the dog likes to be whipped because that is the only way to penetrate certain thick hides—by beating them."

. . . And I will beat you, puffbag, if you manhandle my drawings. . . .

But the fat man, gazing somberly at the sketch, shook his head.

"No, no," he intoned as though hypnotized, "you are completely wrong. You do not know what you are talking about. . . . That is not a whip. Most certainly that is not a whip. We do not permit whips in comic art, whips are not at all funny. . . . It should be . . . it shall be . . . a brick! a brick! The little flea is throwing a brick at the dog who vainly adores him!"

Suddenly the fat man wheeled and stamped away, waving his cigar for Jake to accompany him.

"Come along . . . come along, sir! . . . to my office. . . . We will go into this matter . . . the continuity . . . and the names of these little creatures. . . ."

Jake glared, flabbergasted.

"You better go, fella," said Mackey.

"Who the hell is that?"

"That's Mr. Blum. . . . You better hustle."

An hour later, brushing indifferently by the majesty of Minnie McSwiff, Jake descended into Fifth Avenue's dazzle with a snap of his fingers for any man. He had been engaged, for a consideration, to draw six experimental strips and, if they were acceptable, to join the staff of Colossus Comics at a salary of one hundred dollars a week, his guarantee against fifty per cent of the sales to newspapers of a comic entitled "Patsy Pup and Willie Wee the Flea." As he mounted the top of a bus, he would have kicked the shins of the first beggar to accost him.

The process by which this consummation of meager hopes had come about was still, to Jake, a farrago of lunacy, sapience and incredible gall. A fat man obviously devoid of the rudiments of knowledge had assured him he owned a bonanza in something dashed off for a whim. The man had predicted human beings would shout with glee at the delineation of deeds basically savage, of characteristics condemned by society. Furthermore, he was willing to back prophecies with money. The fat man, of course, was crazy. But if he wanted pictures of dogs wooing fleas and fleas chasing dogs with bricks, he should have them. If he so passionately desired a drama of pathological love in the animal kingdom that he would talk of guarantees

and contracts, then, by heaven! Jake would stage the drama so long as the fat man and his gold were allowed at large. Patsy Pup and Willie Wee! —Jake laid back his head and howled until an old lady in the next seat precipitately quit the bus. Then an unpleasant thought occurred. . . . "You should, my friend, be a comic artist," Cawdor had said. . . . Aw, to hell with Cawdor! Gloating, he wondered what Beth would say.

He was swinging along Eleventh Street like a drum major in a minstrel parade when Ronnie Jeter appeared on the Perry stoop and, beholding a husband's approach, waited in awkward guilt that he had been caught calling in a husband's absence.

"Hi, Ronnie!" cried Jake, and clapped him jubilantly.

Ronnie suffered the cordiality and, indeed, tried to reciprocate. He was no diplomat, however; his smile was wry; it was quite evident that, in addition to guilt and his habitual uneasiness with Jake, Ronnie had something on his chest. He got it off with no more stutters than usual.

"Beth told me . . . that is, she let it out accidentally, she wasn't discussing your affairs, you know . . . about your . . . er . . . situation. That is, she told me you were out looking for a job and, well, I asked her and she admitted . . . things . . . weren't so good. I say, Jake, if there's anything I can do—"

Jake chuckled. "Don't fret, Ronnie. We don't need money."

"That's what I wanted to say, Jake," said Ronnie eagerly. "If you do need money—a loan—I'd be only too glad—"

"Thanks, Ronnie. Thanks just the same." He twirled his cane, squinting thoughtfully at Ronnie. "As a matter of fact, I am in a bit of a hole. Just for the time being." Next week, Willie Wee the Flea and fortune. "Could you let me have a thousand dollars, Ronnie?"

"Sure, Jake, sure! I'll mail you a check—"

"If you don't mind, I'll drop by to-night and get it. If you want my note—"

"Forget it," said Ronnie hastily.

"Well, thanks a lot." Jake continued to squint. It would be a bit awkward if Beth heard about this. Beth distinctly wouldn't approve. Borrowing from friends. From Ronnie of all people. Then it came to him, squinting at Ronnie, how red Ronnie was, how embarrassed, how in agony to get away. Beth would never know, for Ronnie wouldn't tell. Ronnie wouldn't tell anybody. Poor old Ronnie was a gentleman.

"You're a brick, old man!" He slapped Ronnie's back. "See you later!"

Leaping up the stairs to his apartment, he flung open the door and shouted: "Well, the little boy got it!"

"Jiggs!—Got what?"

"The job, woman—the job! He's gonna be rich, the son of a—! One hundred dollars a week to start and millions before we finish. No foolin', Miss Beth. Come kiss Jakey. We're gonna quit this bum's life. We're gonna tell 'em all to go to hell. I'm sick of the Village, anyway. Go get a cook, go get a maid, go get a butler and a chauffeur. Go get a palace on Park Avenue. Go get a Hispano-Suiza. Go get a ticket to Europe and a diamond tiara with emerald bumps all over it!"

"Jiggs, tell me! I don't want a tiara. I want to *hear!*"

"Must have tiara. Diamonds and bumpy emeralds. Just like Minnie McSwiff's. Big, vulgar tiara 'cause we're gonna be vulgar rich. Vulgarity! —crude vulgarity! That's us! Biff! Bang and Zowie! Three cheers for you and me and Willie Wee the Flea!"

"Jiggs, if you don't stop dancing me around, I'll slap you. Have you really got a job and are they going to pay you real money?"

Jake held her in front of him by both arms.

"To-morrow morning, Miss Beth," he declared solemnly, "I will bring you seven hundred and fifty certificates payable on demand by the United States Treasury in seven hundred and fifty silver dollars. That, sweetheart, is merely the bonus on signing the contract."

He might as well, it had occurred to him, hold out two hundred and fifty of Ronnie's thousand.

PART FOUR

XV

In the year 192—, which was the year the seneschals of American culture went native and deified Charlie Chaplin, Paul Whiteman, the architects of skyscrapers and the author of "I'd Walk a Mile for a Camel," the bellwether of the flock, Mr. Irving Mayes, writing in *The Æstheticist*, took to task his peers for failure to recognize a great and peculiar talent.

"Among these," he pronounced, after a brilliant exposition of the comic strip as the twentieth century's most vigorous contribution to graphic art, "stands well above the ruck one solitary master. While the imbeciles of our studios and galleries have been beating the drum behind whatever tripe Europe foisted on us, twenty million morons have been delighting in an American work of art so superior to any foreign achievement that I hereby nominate Mr. Average Man to the board of directors of the Metropolitan Museum. He has discovered that Perry, creator of Willie Wee the Flea, gives him in his daily paper such fantasy as Barrie would envy, such satire as you will not find outside

the pages of Max Beerbohm, such genuine beauty as was never dreamed by all your fumbling disciples of Matisse and Picasso. The immortal companion of Willie, the adoring and pathetic Patsy Pup, I predict will take his place beside the White Rabbit and Sancho Panza in the judgment of posterity. These two, Willie and Patsy, with the constant grace-note to their saga—Willie's brick—serving as the symbol of Fate in mankind's . . ."

Here Mr. Simeon Blum, who seldom read anything, lifted his eyes from *The Æstheticist* and his voice for his promotion manager. He had gotten the guts of it. The name, Irving Mayes, was totally unknown to Mr. Blum; it would mean nothing, he shrewdly guessed, to the twenty million morons; but this sort of thing impressed publishers. Willie Wee needed it. His third best-selling comic, Mr. Blum had noticed, lacked punch lately—too mechanical—not enough "uh-huh"—drat Perry! they must get the fellow into the office once in a while.

Other eyes observed *The Æstheticist* with varying results. Santolina Marr, skimming it in the Lido's sunshine, paused, laughed as at some jest recalled, and, when the hairy Italian looked up from the beach beside her, closed the magazine and nibbled his biceps. Beth Perry immediately went out to the news-stand on Fiftieth Street and bought six copies. Ronnie Jeter faced one that night in the Perrys' penthouse. He stuttered gamely, "That's

swell! I mean—it really means a lot, doesn't it?" Old Man Wimbish threw his marked copy into a garbage can. Joe Armondale, at his typewriter in the *Courier* city room, read to the last period and dutifully began the story which would be headed: "Another Tribute to Famous Artist, Former Local Boy." Weeks later, on the deck of a tramp steamer beating up from Port au Prince to Havana, Bellerophon Cawdor stopped at the point where some one had torn across the word "wealth" and, turning on his back, stared unblinking into the furnace of the sun. To the swine-pens of Eureka, to the mound in its cemetery where Fortitude Perry slept, *The Æstheticist* did not penetrate.

Of the two who, among all men, might have been most concerned in the manifesto of Irving Mayes, one, a youth of eighteen named Buddy Conrad, had read nothing but racing dopesheets since he quit the eighth grade to be an office boy on the New York *Star*. At the moment when *The Æstheticist* went on sale he crouched in the loft Jake had rented for him on East Eighteenth Street, "inking in" the figure of Willie Wee in the last panel of the strip due at the Colossus office that day, and hoping (for his salary of thirty dollars had not been paid for two weeks) that Jake presently would show up with a check and an "Okay, kid." But Jake, who was the other man likeliest to appreciate the Mayes panegyric, at the same moment was singing drunk in the fashionable speak-

easy apartment of Madame Pearl Herrington on Central Park West.

"You must get him out!" Madame Herrington was demanding of the two other encumbrances to her furniture and her peace of mind. "I can't have him howling and smashing things like he did last time. There are people coming." Almost sobbing, she added with dignity, "To tea!"

"You're a gang of muckers all—damn your eyes!" roared Jake. The tune was faintly like a gospel hymn.

"He don't look like he makes no fifty grand a year," said the taxi driver, sipping his drink.

"Oh, that's because he's an artist and has a soul. That's why he dresses that way, isn't it, Madame?" Bobbie Jeter smiled pleasantly on his hostess. "I knew him when he had merely a soul and dressed that way. Now his motive is double; how can people detect the artist-soul without corduroy pants and a green vest for guide-posts?"

The taxi driver replenished his glass from the Venetian decanter. "I knew a guy like that once," he said. "Started with a hot dog concession at Coney Island. After prohibition he made plenty outa booze, but he's got a wienie radiator cap on his Rolls. Says he ain't ashamed of what put him where he is."

"Exactly," agreed Bobbie Jeter. "Only our friend, here, doesn't wear Willie Wee jewelry and loyalty is not precisely one of his virtues. He is,

perhaps, loyal to himself or his conception of himself. What do you think, Madame?"

"Willie Wee," repeated the taxi driver. "I read that every night on the funny page. He draw it?"

"In a manner of speaking—yes. Recently he has had the services of an assistant—a pinch-hitter, I believe they call them—so he could devote more attention to his soul. In fact, I believe art was beginning to pall. Have you turned in your work this week, Jiggs?"

Jake, sprawled on a Louis Fourteenth lounge across the room, paid no attention to anyone.

"Keep your head down, Fritzie boy!" he roared tonelessly.

"Oh dear!" wailed Madame Herrington.

Bobbie patted her hand. "He's perfectly harmless, old girl. Merely a little unhappy because he's rich and famous. So many people are. You should know him as well as I do. He can't stand herd association. Rockefeller, Al Jolson, Zuluoga, the Vanderbilts, Biff McSwiff—all that lot—Jiggs has to get drunk and sing as a form of rebellion against his colleagues. That's why he's always insulting other comic artists. Our boy is 'different.' That's why he beats women."

Madame Herrington ceased wailing at once.

"Don't be alarmed, dear lady! He won't sock you. As a matter of fact, I exaggerate—he beats only one woman and she rather likes it. He inherited her, so to speak, from a professional. Jiggs

is an amateur; it's my private opinion he doesn't enjoy his little charades with rods and chains and crucifixes and so forth as much as he pretends to. But these tales get about, you see, distinguishing one from one's fellows. Excellent for the ego. Surely, Madame Herrington, you don't mean to tell me the rumor has not trickled to your salon that Jake Perry is a sadist?"

"I don't care what he is, get him out of here."

Jake was shouting the words of "Stand Up for Jesus."

"All right, all right," said Bobbie. He killed his drink and approached his charge. "Come on, let's stand up for Jesus, then. We're going places and do things. Madame is expecting a gang of guests."

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," recited Jake. But he stood up.

"Come on—money! You can't leave without paying your bill, Jiggs. Don't be a four-flusher, you big four-flusher." Jake gouged bills from his pocket and dripped them like flowers. Bobbie's hand received, paid and restored. "Thanks, Madame, we'll see you anon."

"God forbid!" said Madame Herrington.

The taxi driver took Jake, somewhat grimly, by the other arm.

"I knew a guy once beat his old woman. They got him, though. One time he bangs her cold with a chair and his little girl gets scared and squawks

to the cops. . . . Up the river. . . . One thing I always said I never would hit a woman. . . ."

His voice receded on the stairs in a duet with "Throw Out the Life-line," and Madame Herrington, with scarcely a moan, closed the door and snapped her garter on the ten dollars.

In the taxi, Bobbie said: "Drive around the Park a bit and then head south. We'll go to the Village. His girl lives down there and she'll take care of him. I'll be damned if I drag him home to his wife this way."

Home to Beth, who apparently loved this sodden lunatic—no, it was a lousy trick to play on any woman. . . . Justine? . . . Well, she didn't matter.

Bobbie appraised the lunatic where he swayed and mumbled in his corner, and took out the flask they had bought at Madame Herrington's.

"Let's have a drink, Jiggs."

Jake let the whisky gurgle. Bobbie tongued the bottle.

"One more for luck. Bottoms up, four-flusher." . . . Get him drunk enough and he'll pass out.

By the time they rang the bell marked "S. Pardee," Jake was butter-legged. Bobbie pushed him up the stairs, said, "Sorry, Justine, we didn't know what to do with him," and with the driver's help propelled him into the bedroom and oblivion, after which the driver departed and Bobbie, sitting

down in the other room, asked rather plaintively if he might have one drink.

"Of course you can, Bobbie, I'll make it right away!"

He watched her, in her simple house dress, with the ringless hands and the bare arms and the dark hair coiled neatly at the back of the neck, while she cracked ice from the small refrigerator, and once more he wondered that such a girl could be . . . Dammit; he liked her. Regardless of what they said about her, regardless of what she said—which you could never call interesting by any stretch of the imagination—he liked her. A woman with no morals and less sense, and he despised evil fools. A lost woman. With her drowned eyes and her child's voice and her unholy obeisance to any whim of that mountebank's in there. Yet a woman with a quality. What other woman in the world would accept as calmly as though it was a package from Macy's this hulk of alcohol and slobber? And then cheerfully mix her guest a highball. And light him a cigarette before he knew his hand groped for one. She was a wonder all right. She was so kind. Maybe that was why he liked her, because intrinsically she was kind. . . . Katzenjammer! You never know why you like people. He liked that devil, Jake.

"Why do you like Jiggs, Justine?"

She regarded him gravely from the New England rocker with its checked covering and its tidy.

"Because he's kind to me, I suppose."

"Kind to you?" He almost dropped his glass.

"Yes. I know, you can't understand that. Nobody can. You think because he does queer things to me that Jiggs is a cruel man. I don't mind him doing those things if he wants to. It's just a sort of game, you see, it's fun because we dress up and pretend to be people. Historical personages. Jiggs is kind to me other times. He treats me as though I mattered. Why should I mind doing something for him?"

Well, by Jove, the girl was honest enough!

"You see," said Justine quietly, "there was another man. Maybe you knew him. Did you know Cawdor?"

"As well as I wanted to. I thought he was a beast."

"He was a beast. He was cruel, really cruel. I didn't like him at all, but I couldn't help myself. Something . . . I don't know . . . bound me to him. He was cruel to me all the time and I hated him, but he was stronger than I was. Then he went away all of a sudden."

"I know. I was in Paris, but I heard. The South Seas, wasn't it?"

Justine shook her head. "I don't know. I hope I never see him again. I was awfully glad he went away. I was free. But I didn't know what to do. I didn't have anything, any money, any job, only a few of Cawdor's books, and after I sold those I

was in a fix. I saw Jiggs' name in the paper one day. He'd been a friend of Cawdor's. So I went to his house—I was starving—and they took me in."

"They?" He knew the rest well enough—who didn't who knew the Perrys?—but he was curious to hear it from her lips.

"Beth and Jiggs." Her gravity shamed his prying. "Beth is a wonderful person. She is kinder than Jiggs."

"But, Justine, how on earth—"

He stopped. What was the use? By Jove, it was too much for him! The harmonious triangle of the husband, the wife and the other woman, and to add to the irony, his own brother abysmally in love with the wife. The last complication didn't interest him much; he had never clicked with Ronnie, whom he held to be a dunce. But Jake's mastery of the situation fascinated him, like the trick of a magician who simultaneously saws two women in halves.

"Justine, what do you suppose Beth thinks—about all this?"

The girl looked away, and he had the feeling that she trembled, not in shame and not in anger, but in fright. He was sorry he had spoken.

"I don't know, Bobbie. She'd never say, would she? And of course I wouldn't ask her. I don't believe she minds, do you, Bobbie? I wouldn't hurt Beth, I couldn't bear to hurt her. Why should she

mind when she knows about Jiggs?—The way he is—she can't help that, and Jiggs can't help it—and if I don't mind, Bobbie—"

"But surely you don't think Jiggs is a true sadist!"

Justine picked at her lap. "He says he is. I don't know about those things, Bobbie."

This, from the ex-mistress of Bellerophon Cawdor and the byword of the Village, was too naïve for young Mr. Jeter.

"Why, Justine, if Jake was a sadist he'd probably have killed you long ago. Look here"—one of his pet taunts occurred irresistibly—"if he gets a kick out of abusing you and humiliating you, and that's what a true sadist does, doesn't he? he wouldn't stop with his private little ring-around-a-rosies. For example, when you were all dolled up in your chains and whatnot, he'd parade you publicly on Fifth Avenue. Imagine the kick for a sadist in that, driving his slave in chains for the world to see!"

"But he did!"

Bobbie gaped.

"What?"

"He did. He led me up Fifth Avenue last week by a chain. I didn't mind. He begged me to let him do it, and it was sort of exciting."

"What happened?"

"Well, nothing much. We'd gotten only as far as Fourteenth Street when some women coming out

of Hearn's—they were East Side Jewesses, and I guess people like that are rather conventional—well, they saw us and began to shout and point, and one big fat one got very angry for some reason and called Jiggs a Yiddish name, and then she hit him with an umbrella. I guess Jiggs got a little scared. Anyway, we hopped into a taxi and came home quick."

Justine was smiling. A slight flush colored her cheeks.

Bobbie, appalled, got up. If this was what their ragging goaded Jake into, they had better ease up on the fellow. He should never have put that stunt into Jake's head, no matter what the temptation to deride him. But who would have dreamed the fool would accept the challenge to his vanity? He was a madman. No telling to what lengths he would go to write the q.e.d. to his pretenses.

"Did you like Paris, Bobbie?"

He looked down at her, Bluebeard's wife, who wanted people to be kind and asked polite questions like a nice little hostess.

"It was all right. I think, on the whole, America is more interesting. You can't call a country dull that can hold you and Jake and Calvin Coolidge, too. Good-bye, lady. Be a good girl. And take care of our seal."

Justine went to the telephone after Bobbie left. She called a number in the Plaza exchange and asked for Mrs. Perry.

"Beth? . . . This is Justine. . . . Jiggs is here. He got pretty drunk, but he's gone to sleep now and he's all right. I thought you'd like to know. . . . Yes, Beth. . . . Yes, I'll do that. . . . No, but I'll get the drugstore to send some. . . . No, I don't know, but I'll ask him as soon as he wakes up. . . . Is that all, Beth? . . . All right, and I'll make him call you first thing in the morning. . . ."

In the Perrys' apartment on the roof of the Dutch Studios, Beth did not return immediately to the living-room, but when she had hung up the receiver walked to the double doors opening from her own room onto the terrace. The night was gold and black and overripe with the heat of late summer. Under its oppressive opulence, New York breathed recumbent, like a huge, voluptuous woman in sensual diapason with the stars. Over there was the East River, with the Long Island shore working a double belt of lights in the dark land and the dark water. Nearer, the Queensboro Bridge loomed immense, and she felt, if she threw a shard of gravel over the balustrade, it would drop precipitously into the twinkle that was the end of Blackwell's Island. To the west the city throbbed, sending up a flare and a constant drumming from the millions of lives caught in its steel net.

All those buildings, and all those people packed among them, struggling for something—what? Struggling, like insects, for a crumb of happiness,

until a big foot squashed them with the quest still blind. And she was here with beauty. With the beauty of the night as close to her as heaven can be to humans, with the beauty of the world—if you consider all to please the senses that—a few steps away for the touching or the asking. Yet happiness stood as far from her as from any distracted beetle.

So much can happen in a few years. You can move from one house into another, and, by moving, into a new life. You can acquire riches and fame of a sort, and new friends and new interests. The whole world can seem different, as it may seem different to a serpent in the spring, and he himself different because he has a brilliant, new coat. But his body inside the coat is the same, and so are the mind and heart and soul inside the body, if serpents own such things.

She had thought, when they left the Village and Jiggs signed the second contract, that she would find something in the new life. Not happiness; no one, of course, ever found that. Not love, for love was a crystal that got smashed. Though you patched it up, the cicatrix was there, and never would you find another crystal like the old. What she had hoped for, probably, was a gaudier yet engrossing globe into which she might stare, and perhaps she had not found it because her eyes could not leave the crystal, blemished though it was. For

the new life was still Jiggs, for whom she must keep a vigil.

Not that Jiggs was a sharper heartache, not that his ways were worse. You can swap a Julie Messenger for a Justine with no great pother, you can even approve the change when the quality of mercy in you is touched. The affair was no one else's business—let them talk—and it had not altered Jiggs so far as she could see. His manner toward her was the same. The tenderness was there, the gratitude for her compassion and her tolerance, the appeal for need of her. She did trouble about him more. That, she had decided, was because of liquor. He drank so much. So did everyone they knew. She had thought, if she were writing a true novel about Americans to-day, it could not avoid reeking with liquor. The days did, or the nights at least, in her home and the homes of her friends, and in all the places they went. Cocktails and highballs continuously, out of the hangover into the pickup and thence into the drunk again, all of it bad stuff, people bored if they didn't get it and like as not to be quarreling viciously after the brief spasm of hilarity. She had stopped drinking for a while. She did not drink very much now. But Jiggs did. Once, sickened and for the moment shocked with actual fear of blindness or a paralytic stroke or sudden death in some form, she had poured all the liquor in the house into the sink. Jiggs, waking

to torture in the desert, submitted and for a week drew Willie Wee with a hand gradually recovering its assurance. The process by which he slipped back into the nightly lush, was scarcely discernible to Beth herself. A month afterward he was saying, "Do you know, I suppose a person like my Aunt Fortitude would consider all of us drunkards —drunkards in the old-fashioned, 'Father, come home with me now' sense—I suppose from that point of view I am a drunkard—or am I, Beth?" and she had been calloused enough to laugh.

The drinking had a lot to do with it, with the haunting notion that life was closing in on her and leaving her out at the same time. With the fear, growing more and more menacing, that Fate squatted with a blackjack around the dark corner. She would watch Jiggs sometimes, at parties or on those rare evenings he sat at the drawing-board with the cognac bottle at his elbow, and in the lines around his mouth and in the whites at the corners of his eyes, she fancied apprehensively she could detect a breaking-up and a sagging that one day would burst without warning. Yet his enduring physical swagger belied the probability—he would lull her forebodings by going out to eighteen holes of golf and returning a little pickled, but looking like Hercules in plus fours.

No, she couldn't ascribe it simply to liquor, or to Jiggs alone, this ache that leaped in her at unpredictable times. To-night he was safe enough in

Justine's hands, and to-morrow he would be penitent; doubtless she grieved to-night because he was too drunk to read about himself in *The Æstheticist*. Wasn't that it? She knew, looking from the parapet across the torpid city, that was not it. Out there where the sky was blackest, hung the big foot, and she was afraid. Inside, where Ronnie waited, was haven, was even escape, did she ask it, and she was afraid. And here was nothing, only herself, so little under that black sky, so tired, too, so futile. Of herself she was afraid most of all.

She turned about and went in.

XVI

Summer died hard that year. On September's first Monday, when the holiday crowds bivouacked on every pinch of sand and green outside the city, tar bubbled like lava in the deserted streets, parks were refugee camps, and the papers told of strokes and drownings and how a mad dog, loose among the Coney Island crowds, terrorized no less insane thousands.

Jake, week-ending at that Long Island home of which Nuts Noonan, the wit, once remarked it had everything but gold snakes for the guests with delirium tremens, fainted on the second tee of the golf course and, after bleeding at the nose for two hours despite ice-packs and absinthe, was rushed through the savage heat to a hospital. There, next day, a bored little man in a white coat assured him that he was good for forty healthful years unless he chose to continue slow suicide. "You can do it more cheaply with other poisons around the house—three or four grams of iodine, for example—but doubtless you have your reasons for preferring bootleg whisky. . . ."

The theorizer on old-fashioned drunkards was sufficiently frightened to depart forthwith for the Adirondacks, taking Buddy Conrad with him. The cold blew down from Canada, frost crackled among the birches, but trout still leaped in Chateaugay, the sun spilled bright on paddle blades at noon, and Jake, stretched on a flat rock beside the lake, approved two miles of green water and hailed above distant peaks the honk of fresh, wild theories winging toward his soul.

Jakey, you, who have had no booze for two weeks, can think truth, and this is truth, by god, the simple, pellucid truth: the devil took you to a high mountain and showed you the kingdoms, and a bargain you struck with him. Worship me, said Simeon Blum, and all shall be thine, the kingdoms and the power and the glory. So you gave him a flea, with your freedom tucked inside it, and what did the devil give you? The kingdom—a houseful of expensive junk; the glory—a name among morons; the power—to drink yourself blind to your misery. That is it, Jakey, the canker bites again after you sloughed it in Eureka, after you checked it in Corinth with a bogus nostrum, after you cauterized it with the torch of war, after Greenwich Village soothed it and then inflamed it, the persistent canker of vile discontent, biting once more because, Jakey, you are not as other men and their lives and their destiny shall not be yours. That is why there has been no happiness in you

these many months, Jakey, that is why you moan. Well, to the devil with what is the devil's, eh? Money? You chucked it once, prosperity and prestige, at Corinth's head, and you can chuck it again at New York's. (And Buddy Conrad, poor sap, swotting away down there in the hotel, will carry on till you are ready to make the break.) Fame? That fellow, Irving Mayes, has some perception, but the civilized minority is small and the rest of humanity doesn't count. . . . "Comic artist!" . . . One of Blum's pantaloons . . . a tumbler in the biggest circus on earth . . . with all the kiddies shrieking . . . till the trapeze act begins. . . .

No, no, Jakey, you can't get away with it. Your own soul despises you. Cut the comedy. Get down to raw meat. . . .

Well, what do you want?

I don't know. Is that important? I don't want what I have.

But you must want something. You can't go off bingo on a runaway horse!

Why not? I might. But let us see: I want freedom again, from work, from fools, from all the little strings of conventional America. I will go away.

Where?

To a castle in the Carpathians, to a scarp in Thibet; what difference does it make? I will take Justine with me, and she shall be my service and

my pleasure. Do what thou wilt. That shall be the whole of the law.

That is all you will do?

All. Perhaps, some day, the answer will come. Perhaps the vision will appear, and then the pin-scratch I leave on the white wall of immortality will be high—higher than any man's! . . .

Well, Jakey, you certainly are feeling pretty fine. Let's go back to the hotel and get two pieces of pie for dinner from that pretty waitress. . . . By the way, Jakey, what about Beth?

Beth? . . . Look at that fish jump! . . . Why, Beth can come along. She always has, hasn't she? Fortunately she and Justine like each other.

So, on an afternoon when the Westchester hills were bronze and scarlet and six hoboes flagged a south-bound freight above Tarrytown, the Chrysler rode the highway into New York, and Jake at the wheel, yelling, "Watch for cops, Buddy!" put her up to sixty and let the wind tear his scalp. That doctor was a liar. He felt as though he could drain a cask of cognac at a smack, or at least one of the twelve quarts under the rear seat. Well—here we come, world—you're a gang of muckers all! . . .

It had been a wonderful six weeks for Ronnie. To be with Beth evening after evening, day succeeding day, was enchantment undeserved, but to possess her companionship undarkened by the shadow of that fellow made it unbelievable—made it almost like marriage. They had dined out at all

their favorite places, they had dined at home with Beth opposite him in the intimacy of candlelight, and once with Beth herself cooking fried chicken "the way *I* like it!" They had gone to theaters and to the better night clubs where Ronnie, with paradise in the crook of his arm, decided he waltzed rather well. One Sunday saw them at Long Beach together, and another on a Hudson River day-boat, sun-drenched and in harmony with the other tourists. They went to hear concerts, which Ronnie dubiously applauded, and to the Bronx Zoo, where he told her how they trap rattlesnakes in Florida. In taxis and houses, in glare or moonshine, her presence lapped him as the water lapped Tantalus, only Ronnie at least might dampen if he could not quench his thirst. Almost that was enough.

Best he liked those evenings when they went nowhere, but in the studio or outside on the terrace Beth read aloud from "Robert Elsmere" or they merely sat quietly and talked. They talked a great deal those six weeks. Ronnie of those things which interested him and which no one else seemed to find interesting. Beth, too, of the things that interested her, which, however trivial, with Ronnie as the listener was as though the Lord talked to Enoch. And they both talked of what interested both, and it was surprising, Ronnie thought, how many of those last things there were. It was surprising because, while he had always enjoyed talking to

Beth, he had suspected sometimes that his audience was a little bored, that in her bright attention lurked the mechanical, and frequently when Beth talked to him he had felt that her talk was judiciously superficial and she was withholding the real concerns of her heart. But now it was not like that. For one thing, it was not he who talked so much these six weeks, it was Beth, and if she talked of books and plays and the absorbing inconsequential dramas of housekeeping, she talked likewise of abstract subjects she had not discussed with him before. She asked his opinions—what do you think of life, Ronnie, what do you believe about God? And she listened, surely not bored, but pondering, nodding her head—"Yes—yes—I think that, too"—as Ronnie, painfully and with many a stumble, risked the exposure and the definition of those vague but cherished children he would not have permitted any other to discover in the secret huts of his mind. Then Beth would answer, speaking as one who understood and expected him to understand, and this small universe in which they talked was complete and beautiful and somehow as thrilling as her body in the crook of his arm.

They were in the studio the night Jake came home, and they were talking of friendship. Ronnie had said, "I think love can't last unless the people in love are genuinely good friends, don't you?" when the door burst open and Jake was between them like a dancing bear.

"Jiggs—darling—why, I didn't expect you for a week!"

The bear shook his overcoat with a dusty plop, said "Oof!" and hugged divinity as any bear might hug a female bear.

"Lordy, what a drive! We didn't leave Albany till three o'clock and kept her at seventy all the way down. Baby, but I'm tired!—Baby glad to see Jakey? Give Jakey big kiss?—I want food and maybe one little drink and then go bye-bye pretty quick— How you, Ronnie?"

The stars went out, the planets crashed in ruin. . . . Ronnie said he was fine, thanks. He shook hands with Jake and rolled a cigarette and asked Jake how the fishing was at Chateaugay. He listened while Jake told about the fishing, puffing hard and silently as he watched Jake shoving forkfuls of salad down his throat, and he even rolled a second cigarette and told Jake about one of the plays they saw, for misery must not forget courtesy and gallantry demands that paradise destroyed be treated as an incident in front of a husband.

So, too, he was casual as he bade them goodnight, and if in Beth's face he could have read an appeal to bridge the chasm splitting his heart, he still would have been too polite and too gallant to have heeded it. He went home, purchasing a bottle of seltzer on the way, and in his rooms he got out the quart of Bourbon he had saved for ten years, and poured a stiff drink, and drank it, an excep-

tional act for a man who sincerely believes that secret drinking is the first step toward damnation.

Ronnie put his head in his hands and suffered. Forever, it seemed to him, he had suffered like this and loved like this, and forever was he to love and suffer. For Beth was never to divorce that fellow and marry him. He had asked her again, and again she had refused.

"Ronnie," she had said, just at the point where Bear Mountain comes out behind the bend and the Hudson winds to a great distance—it had seemed more honorable to ask her there on a boat's deck with many chaperons a peanut's flip away—"Ronnie, I am so fond of you. I think you know that. If I were free, Ronnie, and you still wanted me to marry you, I think I would. But, Ronnie dear, I can't—dear, I can't!" Then, looking at the river, which was clear and laughing that day, she had proffered, simply, the sweet and impossible alternative. "If you want me, you can have me, Ronnie."

If he wanted her! Almighty God, thou knowest how I want this woman. I want her as a man wants the pulse in his wrist and the breath in his lungs. I want her as she is, immaculate and beyond all reproach. I want her for the clean love I can give her, and the protection and the decency and the respect of the world. All that I have been taught, all that I hold good, I want for her as profoundly as I want the woman. Help me, dear God, to be

strong for the sake of the woman I so love. And God had helped Ronnie, there on the dayboat, as the Hudson sparkled in Beth's eyes.

". . . You are right, Ronnie—forget—forget I said that."

And he had tried to forget, as though one, dying, can forget life.

Others forget, pondered Ronnie. They forget, it is said, by travel, the rush of new faces and new scenes. . . . I dislike the new. . . . Some forget through drink. . . . Well, I will have another drink. I will have another drink and try to think of something else.

Ronnie drank, slowly, and thought of Jake. Quietly he hated Jake. His hate was deep, thick-timbered and delicious, the sort of hate that takes root gradually but grows lusty in the dark. His hate throve around Jake alone, it did not concern Beth, it did not touch her. Scarcely did it seem to concern himself. And though it was a great hate, the kernel of it pushing up through the growth was a small and petty thing. He did not hate Beth's husband, or his rival, he hated a man he had lent a thousand dollars.

You are not a profligate lender, are you, Ronnie? When you were young, you read a rule, neither a borrower nor a lender be, and you followed it religiously. But this man was an exception. He was no friend of yours, you did not like him, he puzzled

and embarrassed you. He happened, however, to be related by marriage to someone very dear to you and her welfare seemed inextricably bound with his on the day you lent him money. He did not ask you for it, you were gentleman enough to anticipate his need and make the borrowing easy, and neither of you discussed your motive, he knew it and you knew he knew and the whole business was tacit, it was like a transaction between two strangers for the benefit of an innocent third party. And for a long time you cherished satisfaction in thus having befriended her secretly.

But a small matter, you found, can fructify and become huge. A thousand dollars is a small matter. Had you lost it on the street, you would have ranted and finally forgotten. Because it was a loan, you remembered, and because it was a loan without collateral or note, you remembered nobly. Lending the money was noble of you—it was darn decent!—and though it is all very well to cherish secret satisfaction, you would like to have decency appreciated. You would like, in short, to have your money returned.

Jake had not returned the money. He had not mentioned it. Though he had a good job—a job, you heard, in which he made more money than you did—he apparently had decided to ignore the loan. His attitude, if anything, was that you were his debtor. He was doing you a big favor to let you

hang around. A cad, trading on his wife. And, mark you, this goes on for three years—three years! . . .

Ronnie paced the room.

He stopped at last before the colonial secretary and glowered at it. He lowered the front, extracted a sheet of note-paper from an ordered pigeon-hole and wrote in his precise hand. He addressed an envelope to J. S. Perry, Esquire, Colossus Features, Incorporated, and this he stamped and took out.

Ronnie's second drink remained almost untouched on the table. Nor did he pick it up on his return. He sat with "Robert Elsmere" open on his knees and suffered, now, unrelieved. For a gentleman cannot cherish his decency and eat it, too; by writing the letter he had destroyed decency and hatred both. Ronnie put his head in his hands.

Jake, getting the note at the office three days later, swore.

"The little rat—dunning me!"

He crammed the note in his pocket and sought the cashier to get an advance for steamship tickets.

XVII

MR. SIMEON BLUM WAS SUCH AN AMPLE MAN physically—such an abundance of cheek and chin, so well cushioned in so many spots—and he laughed with such a heaving and quivering of flesh, that people were inclined to receive his laughter as an evidence of perennial good humor and to believe his amplitude of body but repeated an amplitude of heart. These inferences were not the case at all. Whether because he was naturally humorless or because he had made humor his passionate pursuit for so long, Mr. Blum had not laughed in pure mirth since boyhood, only courteously or in the interests of business, and as for the size of his heart, while it could expand in downright suicidal sentimentality for his family or a friend, it could likewise shrink to the proportions of a pebble at the chink of a dollar, as optimistic gentlemen had discovered to their cost.

Jake thought he had never seen a face with more jovial padding and less genial eyes as he sat across from Mr. Blum in Mr. Blum's office and fumbled for retorts to the javelins Mr. Blum was hurling at

him in a sheaf of words. These were all about Mr. Perry's proposed journey abroad, and why the cashier had not drawn the check Mr. Perry requested yesterday, and about humor, in particular the humor of Patsy Pup and Willie Wee, a commodity, suggested Mr. Blum, in which those darlings of æsthetia had been extremely deficient of late, also about the law and contracts, and did Mr. Perry know thus and so, and thus and so?

Apparently Mr. Perry did not, for his only answer to Mr. Blum's legal dissertation had been to blink. One other movement of muscles was noticeable, a gradual extension of the lower lip. Jake was trying to realize, first, that he was being scolded—scolded like a truant child—for failure to do his homework properly and to do it on time, and, second, that the fat man administering the scolding threatened to forbid him egress from the country; furthermore, if Jake was dead set on travel, to rob him of the fruits of genius and to commit this larceny with the sanction of the courts of the United States.

"Do you mean to say"—Jake swallowed—"under my contract the rights to Willie Wee—"

Mr. Blum did mean to say and said again, not crudely but tapping the document before him with a pudgy forefinger, that all drawings furnished and produced by the party of the second part—that is to say, Mr. Perry—and all characters that were the subjects of said drawings, did belong to and were

the exclusive property of the party of the first part —that is to say, Colossus Comics—and that the party of the first part had duly protected the same by copyright and therefore had all of the exclusive rights, including property rights, in and to said drawings and characters.

"I don't believe it," declared Jake. It was preposterous, fantastic—they were his dog, his flea, his curious little creatures, by all the ghosts of Cawdor, Joe Armondale and Gerry Jericho.

In that event, advised Mr. Blum, Mr. Perry had better consult an attorney. He would swiftly find that a contract of employment between an individual and a corporation organized and existing under the laws of the State of New York . . . and so and so . . . and so and so. . . . As a matter of fact, Mr. Perry had not been drawing the strip himself for some time, had he? There was a young man named Conrad, was there not? who, if he were coached and given the assistance of a humorist to write the balloons for Willie Wee . . . ahem . . . ahum. . . . Of course, Colossus Comics would regret losing the services of Mr. Perry, to say nothing of the pleasant association, but if Mr. Perry refused to work in the office, insisted on going to Europe—in fact, if Mr. Perry kept on drinking as Mr. Perry had been doing for more than a year, thereby placing in jeopardy the prompt delivery and the expected quality of his strip—if, in short, Mr. Perry violated the terms of his agreement with

Colossus Comics, then Colossus Comics would have no choice—

"You god damned thief!" Jake smacked fist in palm. "Why, you fat thief!" Mr. Blum's eyes retreated into their cushions, he had never looked more strangled with merriment about to burst. "Do you know what you can do?"—

Jake told Mr. Blum what he could do. Mr. Blum listened, the pinpoints steady among the uproarious billows. When Jake had finished, Mr. Blum said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Perry." The door slammed. Mr. Blum, without a chuckle, reached for the telephone and instructed the operator to have Mr. Conrad come in.

Jake went out past the leaning tower of Biff McSwiff without yielding to the impulse to kick it. The brick against his own ear burned not so corrosively as the wrath in his blood. All the lawyers and judges in all the courts of the land could not stop him from enacting his desires, all the contracts in Christendom could burn in hell before he would submit to the insults of a swollen louse who proposed to regulate not only his freedom but his morals. Stop him from drinking! Hell, he would drink all the booze on Manhattan Island and spew it out in Sim Blum's face if he felt like it. . . .

Who was Sim Blum, anyway? What was Colossus Comics? They could take their whole outfit and stick it where he had told Sim Blum to stick it, and the difference was a fingersnap to Jake Perry. Sup-

pose the contract did hold, suppose they swindled him out of Willie Wee, gave it to Conrad—hell, he could draw another comic; hell, he could do something so infinitely superior to comics, to the comprehension of Sim Blum or any of his rabble, that it was just as well the break came when it did. He would not sell his soul again, the only soul of Jake Perry, he would bestride his soul with no man's hand on the bridle and ride it screaming down the world. . . .

Jake thrashed across Central Park like an animal loose in the jungle. The late afternoon was bitter for so early in October. A leaden sky menaced the shrubbery already shriveling to brown, and along the walks old newspapers skittered, and paused, and skittered wildly on again as though they ran hobbled in fear.

Jake stalked with tyranny stalking beside him. But it was his own tyranny, the will to annihilate whatever opposed his will. He was an emperor in a camel's hair greatcoat, slashing with his malacca scepter not bushes alone but dragons and slaves, fat dragons breathing "wherefors" and "whereases," slaves who did the dragon's bidding, and other slaves, mostly pretty ladies and hotel clerks, who did Jake Perry's. . . .

Five thousand dollars. . . . And three thousand in the savings account. . . . And Beth has a couple of thousand in her bank. The steel stock will bring another ten thousand. It's in Beth's name, but

that's all right. . . . Twenty thousand dollars. You can live on that comfortably in Europe for several years. You can lease a villa. Villa in the south of France. In Provence, where the Marquis de Sade had his. Or was that Gilles de Retz? . . . And the *Berengaria* sails Saturday. Break the lease on the apartment, pay bills later. That ass, Ronnie Jeter, dunning me for money and sleeping with my wife, for all I know. Where's his letter? Left it in the other coat. . . . Damn him! Damn everybody! We're going away from here. . . . Get ready, Justine!

A man rose from a bench, blocking his path. He was a big man, as big as Jake, yet his clothes bagged and slopped on him, making him seem cadaverous. The skin of his neck bagged, too, above the flannel shirt, and it was mottled and unhealthy-looking skin. But it was tight across the bulging forehead, and by that forehead and the broken nose Jake would have recognized him without the unforgettably refulgent eyes.

"The sun is in malignant Scorpio," said Cawdor. "And darkness hides the face of Capella, the little she-goat. How shine the stars for you, Jake Perry?"

He said it as he might have asked the time, and Jake, who had fallen back a step, might well have been the gentleman who fears to produce his watch. No hand was offered, none seized by either of these two. They stood motionless, a foot apart,

stranger halted by stranger, or friends met casually. The twilight was no bleaker than this meeting.

For Jake, at least, was in it none of the glad leaping up of most reunions. The shock of recognition was followed too closely by the shock of Cawdor's appearance—the man was literally a scarecrow, the death's head face no less than the tatters. At once a red light flashed in Jake's brain: Watch out, he is broke, he is about to make a touch; watch out, that man who was always strange is sick in body and mind.

At any other time, or had Cawdor been in better state, Jake might have played the friendly part. At least, he would have simulated warmth toward one he had never ceased to hate since a certain afternoon in Cawdor's studio. But, in this moment, two behests were on him: first, to hoard twenty thousand dollars from depredation of any sort; second, the need to wipe out the smart of recent outrage. Sim Blum had to be paid back somehow, and Cawdor was a handy whipping-boy. Cawdor the Great in rags . . . well! well!

Jake stared under pinched brows, under the tilted lid of his Borsalino hat, feeling the rot and filth of Cawdor's clothes, feeling the bite of the autumn dusk; feeling his own coat collar snug against his neck, and the warmth of his gloves, and the comfort of feet shod in custom-made shoes, and a cane that is a scepter.

"Hi, Cawdor," he said, "what breeze blew you in?"

"I came with Antares, with the fiery constellations of the South. There are stings in that wind's bosom, brother."

. . . and once, thought Jake, this shivering humbug impressed me. He grinned, giving his stick a jaunty twirl.

"Still the same old Cawdor! Always there with a pat line from the Scriptures. How are the Baphomets, and all the little Baphomets?"

Cawdor had not shifted from the position he had taken on rising from the bench, a hunched position made grotesque by the bagginess of his trousers. His arms hung loose, and a little back, so that Jake was minded of the vaudeville crack, "When are you going to jump?"

But now those long arms lifted the hands up and into the side-pockets of his coat, Cawdor seemed to contract and grow taller, and Jake felt himself go hot and uncomfortable for no reason save that Cawdor looked at him.

He said, deliberately contemptuous: "Staying near here, Cawdor?"

Over Cawdor's beak face spread a smile, the ghastlier for the yellow light of evening on the yellow skin.

"When the dogs bark, fear has come into the kennel."

"Meaning that I am afraid of you, Cawdor? You are sick, man. What you need is a doughnut and a cup of coffee."

Cawdor had maintained his smile, his eyes never left Jake.

"You asked me a question. Am I stopping near here? No. But the question reminds me . . . I had expected to stop in a certain house. With a certain lady. But the lady was not agreeable to the suggestion."

"Tough luck!" Jake twirled his stick. "There's a sheep-pen over there."

"Sheep are sometimes better bed-mates than bitches. The lady doubtless is a good bed-mate. Unfortunately, toward me she was cold. I might say, did I not know that this lady is well protected, that she was afraid. Afraid of me!—I wonder why?"

Jake shrugged. "I'm not interested in your sleeping arrangements, Cawdor. However, looking at you, I can't say I blame the lady."

"He is not interested." Smile nor stare altered. "He is not interested, perhaps, in ladies. He is interested in Art, in creating abominable little excrescences for our lavatory press. He is interested in the yawps of sniveling little critics. He is interested in the worship of chambermaids and pimps. Or perhaps he is interested in money, the excellent dollars with which he can buy cunning little hats and nobby little sticks."

Jake, hot to the ears, sneered in Cawdor's face. "So that's it! He's jealous—the poor bum is jealous!"

Cawdor ignored the interruption.

"The complacent Mr. Perry, the new genius in the national hogwallow, is not interested in my sleeping arrangements. But I was sufficiently interested in his to make some inquiries. Mr. Perry, it appears, has other games than committing horrid little eyesores to paper. He fancies himself a naughty fellow. Besides his cunning little hats, he buys cunning little whips. He pretends to be a little demon. He stamps his foot and yelps 'Oh, look!' at the sight of blood. Rollo Among the Masochists. . . . Fool, I do not envy imitation artists or imitation lechers!"

Cawdor's voice had changed. He spoke rapidly, spitting his words where before he had drawled them.

"A worm crawled in the darkness and I trod upon it and it clung to my foot. An urchin found the worm and used it to bait his fish-hooks. Because he snared a few minnows, he runs shouting of whales, and I, forsooth, am jealous, I covet the slug I cast off! Bah, my little friend, my cunning monkey, my Boy Scout playing at man's games, I have other fish to fry than your mess of baby perch. By chance you cross my path again—do you think I would have sought you out, fool?—and having nursed on a bit of golden pap, you slobber nastily. I do not

like it, but the whelp's not worth the spanking. Shaking your little stick will not save your face, my bantam. To strike me? It would please me a little to kill you, a very little, for I doubt the blood is red. But you will not strike me, whelp, you are afraid. Always you have been afraid, eh? You would murder me, I see. Well, murder is a manly art. Have you no stomach to try it?"

Only a madman can glare and smile at the same time. A madman cuffed in tatters, with a yellow light on his yellow face, and his hands sunk where the curling fingers can't be seen. Madman in the dusk, if I strike you one or both of us will die. I will not strike you. . . .

"Chingaling, little beast," said Cawdor. "My compliments to the Lady Andromeda."

He turned his back and walked away, scarecrow shuddering among the trees, vulture lost in the dark.

Jake moved at last.

"Cawdor!" he called. "Cawdor!"

The man did not pause. Jake plunged his hands into his trousers' pockets, brought them out clenched, and opened them with a sweep of both arms.

"There, you bum!—There!"

The spatter of coins on the frosty pavement made a ringing in the empty park. But Cawdor kept on.

Jake took the other direction. Once, beyond an

arc light, he looked over his shoulder, thinking to see the fulfillment of the stooping, groping figure his fancy conjured. There was no figure, only the desolate knoll and the black trees. He sunk his head against the wind, walking fast.

Human vanity, no less than fleshlier particles, can endure so much before it cracks, and then the fracture requires time and plenty of ointment to heal. A few dimes pitched to a mendicant usually is an excellent antidote to mortification, but not when the mendicant spurns them and excoriates the donor. Likewise, a madman's ravings may be inspired by the meanest and plainest motives, but if he raves truth, it takes a deal of rationalizing that he was both mad and envious to soothe truth's cuts.

By the time he reached home, Jake had succeeded only in yoking Cawdor and Sim Blum together as ring-leaders of a broad conspiracy, in which minor villains were Ronnie Jeter, Bobbie Jeter, practically all his other friends, even his wife, to belittle him and tear him down because he was cleverer and stronger than any of them. He was indelibly chagrined, furiously angry and yearning for sympathy and flattery.

Hence, when Beth, after suffering his kiss, almost at once demanded if Ronnie Jeter had ever lent him money, his reply was not shaded by discretion.

"Who the hell wants to know?" He turned on her with flares in his eyes and the short upper lip

smothered. "Look here—have you been sneaking through my pockets?"

Denial or shameless admission she had expected, not this burst of resentment. Jake's strategy with his wife through the years had seldom included straight-forward attack, and when it came, they were both a little startled. On Jake the effect was to push the fighting.

"Answer me! Don't just stand there. Have you been sneaking on me?"

"What does it matter? I want you to tell me," said Beth stubbornly, "if it's true you owe Ronnie Jeter a thousand dollars."

For an hour she had been tortured by the slip of paper the cleaner's boy had so casually handed her, reading it over and over, picking it up and laying it down, thinking across three years of material glut and spiritual hunger to the date Ronnie's letter had not failed to make concrete, recalling the very afternoon and the lie Jake must have told her, unbearably ashamed for him, ashamed for herself, sick at the memory of every expensive evening so lightly accepted from Ronnie —and oh, the times she had borrowed a dollar, five dollars because she had had no change! Had she always repaid him?—and the shame and the misery eating deeper as she realized Jake's smug acquiescence in a situation where he might have suspected the worst of her, where, indeed, she might in-

nocently have paid his debt with her body but for the decency of the man to whom she offered it!

"You do owe it to him," she accused. "You've owed it to him for three years. You got it that day you got the job, and you told me a lie, you said they gave you an advance!"

"Well, what of it? Sure, I borrowed a thousand bucks from the dirty little tightwad—it's probably the first nickel he ever turned loose in his life. Why shouldn't I? As a matter of fact, he came running to me to lend it. I didn't 'specially need it. But I didn't mind giving him the glorious feeling of saving his lady-love from the gutter. Apparently *you* gave him that idea—and it was a damn lie, too!"

"Oh—Jiggs!" She rocked her arms at her sides. "Why didn't you pay him back?"

"Because I damn well didn't choose to. A fat chance he's got dunning me, too. I'd see him in hell before I'd give him a dime."

"Jiggs, you must pay him back—you must pay him back at once."

"Yeah?" He walked slowly toward her, ramming his hands into his pockets and lowering his head as though he planned to butt her. "Look here, my lady, will you kindly mind your business? You are not giving me any orders—see? Nobody's giving me orders!"

"But it is my business! You pay him back—you hear?"

"In a pig's eye! I've got a better use for my

money. Why should I pay him? Pay my wife's lover? Hell, if you're not worth a thousand dollars to Ronnie Jeter, I'll rustle you up some better customers!"

So . . . he had said it . . . said it at last. What she had expected him to say, yet dreaded and cried out against in her heart because, once it was said, her heart would break. . . .

"I'll leave you, Jiggs," she whispered. "I'll leave you for that."

All his muscles seemed to bunch. . . . Down with her! Down with all of them! . . . Cawdor . . . Blum . . . The whole lot! . . . Who do they think they are? Who does she think she is?

"Leave me?" he cackled. "That's a hot one! Do you think I want you sneaking around? Do you think I need you? You've lived in my house, you've spent my dough—plenty!—and what did I ever get out of it? A pair of horns and a thousand dollars!—Leave me? Hell, I'm a good mind to throw you out!"

Panting, he glared at her, only by some deep paralysis of sentiment restrained from smashing her in the face, and as she walked backward away from him, her eyes wide and awful, fearful agony shook him to his boot-heels, and he drowned it with fresh buckets of anger pumped out of his hatred for the world. And all the while she was moving about in her room, which was not long, he mumbled to himself and cursed, kicking a chair out of his

way, breaking the neck of a bottle, drinking and cursing and mumbling again. This until he heard the door close and, the bottle gripped in his hand, stood silent in the silence.

XVIII

THE APARTMENT WAS DARK, IMPENETRABLY black, and for a second this disconcerted him. He had forgotten cutting off the lights when he went out last night, or perhaps he expected brightness because always there had been brightness. The darkness was stuffy, it smelt warm and like paint, and somewhere a radiator sizzled loudly. It must have been sputtering that way, unheard, for hours. He finally found a button, pushed it, and for a moment waited in the glare. There was his stick on the couch. There was the overturned chair. He noted broken glass near the kitchen and, on the low table, the bottle a third full just as he had left it.

Irritated, he went over and shut off the radiator. The maid should have done that. But the maid, he remembered, must have come and gone away because there had been no one to let her in. No one. Nevertheless, he inspected the other rooms, lighting all the lights and looking around as though he expected to find the maid asleep or hiding, and he looked at familiar objects as though he expected them to have changed. They were unchanged—except the top of Beth's dressing-table. Not so much

as a scrap of paper there. Turning away from it, glancing at her bed, he felt foolish and unaccountably resentful. No reason to discover notes on pillows outside a book or play.

In his own room, he opened the closet and began pulling out his traps. Bags and shoes and a clutter of drawing paraphernalia. Racks of clothes he flung on the bed, beside them the contents of several bureau drawers which he pawed over until they were hopelessly disordered. Staring at the mess, he threw the last shirt on the floor and returned to the studio, where he collected ice and a fresh bottle. What you need, Jakey—he confided—is a drink.

Here he had sat last night, in exactly the same depression in the couch, and made his plans. They had seemed very clear: primarily to write a few letters, which would take care of the future, including lease, stock and a suit against Colossus Comics; and presently to embark for freedom, his thumb to his nose and his Justine toting the baggage. But now his apathy toward letter-writing was immense; it had been a mistake to invite his golden mood to celebration, to wake in a Broadway hotel with nothing done, a vile headache and a hazy recollection of many barrooms. Doggedly he assured himself that his plans were still all right, he was simply shot from all that liquor. . . . Take another drink, kid, it will pick you up; when Justine comes, she'll attend to the packing. . . . He emptied the old bottle.

On a console table across the room, from her exquisite detachment of velvet and ermine, Beth gravely regarded him. Conscious of the legendary sentiment attached to photographs, he scrupulously challenged this one, staring it down, defying it to touch him, telling himself how meaningless it was. Why, he reasoned, for more years than he could remember Beth had been merely a habit. Men acquired the wife-habit as they did the work-habit, because it was supposed to be good for them and necessary to their welfare, and most husbands died in the belief. Well, he was no dupe, he could recognize and throttle a useless habit in time to save his soul. One wife less, one chain less, eh, Jakey? Drink to your freedom, Jakey, drink to your broken habits! . . .

His watch said fifteen minutes past seven. Surely it was later than that! He put his wrist to his ear, wishing he had told Justine to come sooner, thinking that it seemed hours since he entered this room. Suddenly he got up and began to prowl, nervously, aimlessly. . . .

Why should they heckle him, these scorned and futile voices? Beth's, Cawdor's, Bobbie Jeter's, Blum's, dumb Ronnie's and a vague chorus long ago forgotten? They were nothing to him, nothing! They were the voices of the well-destroyed, and what they said was rubbish and spindrift. They had no business here, protesting his liberty, these defeated voices. Why should he listen?

". . . Jiggs—Jiggs darling! I fear you are over-sanguine, Mister Perry, if you estimate as irreplaceable your position in this office. An exhibitionist, Jake, and nobody takes you seriously, you know that, don't you? Get out of here, clumsy little boy. And murder is a manly art, but you are afraid, you have always been afraid. Little Rollo, snapping his whip. . . ."

He had reached the couch again. He put fresh ice in his glass and poured it full. Afraid of a few voices? Hell, he cared no more for their maledictions than he did for their reproaches. . . . You are nothing to me, voices, nothing! I curse you! I drink you down! I laugh at you, voices, as you laugh at me. . . . The glass shook in his hand . . . as you laugh at me. . . .

When Justine, at eight o'clock, rang the Perrys' apartment bell, not two hours had elapsed since Jake telephoned her, yet it had been time enough to change the sober dictator, surly but clear in his orders to dress and come at once, into a maudlin child who caught her arm and whispered that there were ghosts in the walls.

"Over there—do you see? . . . Come out, Cawdor! I see you—I am not afraid of you, murderer! . . . Look, he is all bloody . . . on his face, and on his hands . . . dripping from his hands. Don't let him touch you, Justine, don't let him come near you. . . . Keep back, killer! I am not afraid of you, killer! Do you think I am? Do you think—"

She strove to control him, pressing his face between her palms.

"Jiggs, there's no one there. Please—please—no one!"

He let her turn his head, goggling at her booby-like, and as always when he was this drunk, she was not sure where acting stopped and genuine delirium began.

"They've taken him away. They got him, eh? And they'll kill him, won't they? He'll go to the chair, that Cawdor, he'll burn. . . . That's the way they say it, he'll burn. We'll see it in the newspapers—'Cawdor Burns in Chair.' Do you think he'll be afraid, Justine? He'll be afraid then, won't he?"

She led him toward the couch. "Of course he will. And he won't bother us any more. Sit down now. I'm going to get you something to eat."

But Jake, though he sat down, continued to stare and mumble.

"Afraid . . . afraid. . . . He won't be afraid. He said I was afraid. Am I, Justine? Am I?"

"Of course you're not. You're not afraid of anything."

He began, then, a rambling tirade apparently directed at Bobbie Jeter, and Justine went to the kitchen, resolved to get food down him. In the icebox were cold chicken and a plate of rice, and these she brought out with a glass of milk and a pot of strawberry jam, spreading a cloth on the end of

the long table and trying to make things look attractive as Beth might have done.

She was perplexed and terribly distressed. For Jake had told her that he and Beth were "through" and that she must sail with him Saturday.

In the maimed and docile waif that was Sarah Pardee, life had hammered out most senses save the sense of gratitude, and to be charged with gratitude had not often been her fortune. When the future seemed a bottomless gully, two people had been kind to her, and her reaction was inordinate. It included neither logic nor much of competence; gratefully she gave Jake what he commanded; Beth she worshiped in humility, not attempting to understand her, satisfied that her own part in the puzzle was too minor to matter, and content that this was so. Jake's talk of castles in Europe was just wild talk, lines in their private melodrama—she wanted nothing better than to go on living as they lived. And suddenly, bewilderingly, tragedy crashed. For it was tragedy, incomprehensible tragedy, that Beth should desert Jiggs. What was to be done?

She could, at least, try to sober him.

"Jiggs, honey, I've got nice food ready. Please eat—won't you?"

He had been hunched over the whisky bottle, not drinking but squeezing it with both hands as boys hug a baseball bat in choosing sides, and his monologue had died to a rumble of oaths addressed promiscuously, half of them to himself. When she

touched his shoulder, he looked up with a queer, sly expression. She urged him again.

"Please eat, Jiggs—it'll do you so much good."

He rose submissively, but when she tried to take the bottle, he jerked away and began to shout at her. She was a spy. Cawdor's spy. Sneaking in to rob him. Sneaking through his pockets. She was like all the rest of them, bent on ruining him. Did she think he was afraid? He would show her, he would show them all—down, traitor! On your knees, Jezebel!

He towered, bottle half raised, and as she shrank back, pleading mutely against the madness in his eyes, for the first time she was afraid. She opened her arms wide.

"I am your woman, Roland. I am Justine. Do what thou wilt!"

Hopeless to prevent it, she waited the blow, but while he stared the passion seemed to drain out of him, leaving him uncertain and ashamed and all at once tractable. She could have the bottle—he gave it to her—and he would eat if she said so—he shambled after her to the table, and there he allowed her to put a fork in his hand and spread a piece of bread and make him drink the milk much as if he had been a baby.

Justine was elated. He would be all right now, he would get sober and perhaps go to sleep and she could think, she could decide what to do. But suddenly Jake renewed his mumbling, an incoherent

slobber of words and food, he dropped his fork and, through a mouthful of rice, demanded whisky. His eyes were wild.

"Please, please eat some more, Jiggs," she begged. But she brought the highball, mixed as weak as she dared.

Jake gulped it. Shoving back his chair, he rose, the tips of his fingers on the table, and, in a voice as normal as an after-dinner speaker's, addressed the room at large.

"Do you see this room, Justine? You like it, eh? You think it is beautiful, comfortable, full of beautiful, comfortable and expensive things. All bought with my money. That is to say, bought with blood money, with the sweat and the blood of my body and my soul. If this room could do it, Justine, it would destroy me. It would destroy me just as my wife and my friends and this country and this civilization would destroy me. They do not know that I am the destroyer. Thus saith the Lord God: 'Smite with thine hand and stamp with thy foot!' I am not afraid of this room, bought with my blood. Justine, it is time for an atonement!"

One hand shot out to the nearest object, the pot of strawberry jam, and with a single motion Jake sent it spinning to the opposite wall. The bull's-eye was a Cashmere shawl, rich with old and lovely colors. The pot burst like a shell, exploding jam in a crimson aureole which slowly dripped and trickled to the couch beneath.

Suddenly Jake seized the platter of rice and hurled it after the jam. He followed with his own plate and the dish containing the remains of the chicken. Other dishes and a silver jug were beyond his reach. He pulled the cloth toward him, hunked his missiles together and let fly as with a sling-shot. In the far corner, a lamp went down.

The couch was speckled with jam, broken china and bits of chicken. A wide, white gash in the gray wall marked the flight of the jug. Jake came out from behind the table, taking as he passed the large brass candelabra that decorated one end. He swung it by the middle prong. He was very deliberate in all he did.

First in his path was Beth's writing-desk, a cherished antique. The Chinese lamp on top he knocked off with one stroke and the print above he clubbed to powder. At some effort he removed the heavy upper part of the desk and, staggering with it in his arms, demolished a low tea-table. Down to annihilation went the craft and beauty of old Dresden. He hacked the desk until the candelabra's base broke off.

Etchings and a long Adam mirror offered no resistance, he pulled them from the walls and jumped on them. But the piano was a sturdier foe. Jake stood in front of it like a bull before the matador, his head swinging between his shoulders and his chest heaving. He opened the front. He lifted the back. He yanked at the strings, which yielded noth-

ing save a discordant twanging. Apparently, he decided to shirk this job, for he passed on toward the fireplace after pulling another lamp from its moorings. The hearth, however, presented formidable weapons. Holding a heavy andiron, he returned to the piano.

The first stroke landed among the bass keys with the shock of a thunderclap. Then all the lamentations of hell broke loose in a howling clamor as Jake swung up and down, chopping like a demoniac woodsman, while chips flew and bass, treble, black and white shrieked their death agonies.

Justine had not moved from behind the chair where Jake's speech had arrested her. She had stood impotent, watching his every methodical act, stupefied by such vandalism, yet thinking—if she thought anything—that it was his property and he had the right to destroy it if destruction answered some need in him, and perhaps, oh God! he'll quit in a minute and really be worn out and go to sleep. But as the piano kept up its frightful requiem, she put her hands to her ears. This could not go on. Something—the police—the janitor—the hand of God—must stop it. Let him beat her, but dear heaven! let him beat the piano no more! let him silence it forever! let him be satisfied!

And, for a moment, satisfaction or sheer exhaustion appeared to have won. Jake dropped the andiron. He glared at the instrument which, whatever its interior ruin, he had succeeded only in denting.

Sweat poured off him, he wobbled on his legs, slowly he wiped his hands on his trousers as a tired workman might at the blast of the twelve o'clock whistle.

Justine prayed. At the other end of the room, twice as far from her as from Jake, was an aquarium on a teakwood stand. It was an oblong box of glass and lacquer wrought with tiny Tritons and surmounted by a canopy from which hung little gold bells. Miniature Chinese temples, dwarf trees and water plants were submerged in the box, and two goldfish swam there. The year before, Jake had bought the aquarium for an outlandish sum. He had personally installed the fish, christening them Patsy Pup and Willie Wee, though in tender moments he had been known to address them as "Pidge" and "Widge" and to assure Justine on other occasions that they joyfully answered to "Justine" and "Roland." From the instant the sack of the apartment took on system, Justine had been aware of the aquarium, waiting for Jake to reach it, sure that he would not damage it—how could he without imperiling his pets?—and trusting that its obtrusion into the line of pillage would be a final check.

Now, as she watched, she saw him pivot and stare all around him, saw his eyes stop at the aquarium, saw them travel on to the whisky bottle and hold fast there. A good five fingers had been miraculously spared. Jake clumped through the wreckage and tilted the bottle to his lips.

The last drop ran out. . . . He's through at last, thank God! thought Justine.

"Smite with thine hand and stamp with thy foot!" roared Jake.

He strode the short distance like a crusader, lifted the aquarium high and brought it down with terrific impact. Fish, water, glass, temples, bounced to every corner of the studio.

"Smite! Smite, Justine!"

But Justine had not stayed to witness the execution of Patsy Pup and Willie Wee. In Beth's room she crouched at the telephone, frantic to locate the one person in the world who might bring sanity to Bedlam. . . .

". . . Ronnie! Ronnie! Is Beth there? . . . Oh, you must find her . . . please! please! . . ."

Back in the studio she could hear, and thanked her luck she could hear it while she still clung to the 'phone, the continuing crashes. Jake must be making a thorough job of it; woefully she wondered when he would start on the other rooms.

The concussions were coming at longer intervals. They were varied with crunchings and cracklings as Jake stalked his surviving prey among the ruins. For a long time she listened only to his footsteps. When, at last, even these stopped, she waited, trembling.

No sound came from the studio. After the appalling racket, the silence was ominous. She was afraid to stay, afraid to go out. To telephone farther was

impossible; he would catch her sure. She cowered in an agony of uncertainty. What was he doing?

After a long time, she heard him again. He was muttering. It seemed to her that he was muttering and weeping. Justine went out.

On the edge of the couch, himself disheveled as the room around him, Jake sat with his elbows on his knees and his head bent, staring at the backs of his hands. They were clenched on nothing, yet it was as though he gripped a steel bar. She could see his muscles taut and quivering. Jam, she noticed, ran out of his hair and streaked the side of his face; his whole figure would have seemed comic had she not been so sorry for him. Unreasoningly and deeply sorry.

"Jiggs," she said.

He looked up. Yes, there were tears among the jam. Only small boys can be so piteous and so funny at the same time.

"They've licked me, Justine." He spread his hands toward the dreadful clutter. "The bastards have licked me." A spasm like a baby's grief twitched his face. "But they won't! They won't!" He was on his feet, weeping, cursing, shaking his fist at the ceiling. "I'll show them I'm not afraid! I'll show you, old Nobodaddy!"

Justine drew back. Bewildered, she saw him plunge through the débris. He was headed for the bathroom. He passed her and she did not try to stop him. She followed him to the door, watching his

back where he stood before a cabinet, fumbling among jars and bottles. Some of the bottles fell and broke. Destruction again—dear Lord, would this never end?

Her scream did not halt the sudden lifting of his right arm.

"Jiggs! Jiggs! What are you doing?"

As she clutched him, the vial was still spilling liquid into his gaping mouth. But she was too late. His fingers opened, glass strewed the basin bright brown, and he turned on her the ghastliest look she had ever seen, a grin, the foolish grin of an impudent child, and the grin fading before the sudden, terrible realization of excruciating pain.

He threw her off.

"Jiggs! Jiggs!"

Coughing and tearing at his throat, he staggered toward the couch, and she could only stumble after him, crying his name.

"Jiggs!—Why did you do it?"

It was horrible. He was making noises like an animal, the guttural hack-hack of a dog that cannot retch, and he writhed and doubled, threshing arms and legs so that she was struck, she could not hold him, and only now and then could she see the convulsed face, the lips dark and twisted.

No use to pray or plead now—hurry, Justine, hurry, hurry!

Beth and Ronnie, coming from the elevator, met her in the hall and with her ran the few steps back.

What is it, Justine? What has he done? . . . Poison? What kind? . . . Dear God, she does not know! . . . The bottle, Justine—anything—the pieces—the label! . . . Ronnie, grab his arms. Hold him—you must! . . . Jiggs, Jiggs, tell me what you drank! . . .

It was Beth in command; Beth who 'phoned for the doctor; Beth who said, "Iodine! There wasn't much in the bottle, thank Pete!"—and rushed to the kitchen, and forced the milk and white of egg between the set teeth; Beth who held his head and urged and soothed him and minded nothing of jam rubbed into her sables or what was happening to the rest of her.

"I'm glad I took that Red Cross course," she said, and thought how silly it was that she should make such a remark at such a time.

"He's going to vomit," warned Ronnie. Carefully he pushed some ruins out of the way. The most tragic thing to him was what mysterious calamity had overtaken the Perrys' apartment.

"Shall I get a towel, Beth?" asked Justine, whose thought went no farther than to serve.

The center of attention heaved mightily, and as his wife steadied him on one side and his mistress on the other, he thought of nothing much but that Death was quitting him in each blue gush and Life resurging to the depths of his scorched viscera, and that this was very good.

Mr. Simeon Blum, calling a few moments later,

realized with characteristic sagacity that his visit was inopportune. He apologized, explaining his anxiety to correct a misunderstanding with Mr. Perry—Mr. Perry had been slightly upset the day before and perhaps he, Mr. Blum, had acted hastily, it was all a mistake—would the young lady assure Mr. Perry that the matter of the trip was quite all right and Mr. Blum hoped to see Mr. Perry on the morrow? and give Mr. Perry Mr. Blum's warm regards? The young lady, who had not budged the crack in the door, said she would tell Mr. Perry—and a damn pretty girl, thought Mr. Blum, a very pudding of smiles as he waddled away. He liked that madonna type, especially when they were mussed. Evidently he had interrupted something very tasty. Lucky dogs, these comic artists! . . .

The doctor had come and gone. In the studio, Ronnie dumped the last shovelful of trash into the packing box. Justine, assisting him, sighed as she noticed on top a dead goldfish.

He'll be sorry to-morrow, she thought—poor Roland! and did not mean the fish.

They looked around. The room, though denuded, was fairly clean now.

"Can I take you home, Justine?" asked Ronnie.

He nodded mechanically when she told him not to bother—but he might drop her at Beth's hotel, she had promised to get Beth's things.

Ronnie put on his hat and coat. Through the

open door he could see Beth bending over the long heap on her bed, and his mind framed her words, "Better—lamb?" He tiptoed to the threshold. Beth looked up. She smiled—with her old brightness, he felt—and she put her finger to her lips.

"Sh-h-h-h," she said. "He's gone to sleep."

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